A BROKEN BLOSSOM

BY FLORENCE MARRYAT.

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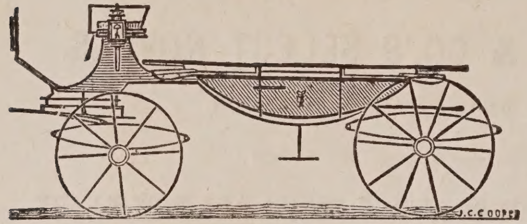

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A BROKEN BLOSSOM.

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A Novel.

BY

FLORENCE MARRYAT,

AUTHOR OF 'LOVE'S CONFLICT,' ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHEAP EDITION.

LONDON:
F. V. WHITE AND CO.,
31, SOUTHAMPTON STREET, STRAND.
1882.

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Dedicated to

MY DEAREST CHILDREN AND MOST FAITHFUL FRIENDS,

EVA FLORENCE

AND

FRANCIS FREDERICK MARRYAT,

WITH THEIR MOTHER'S PROUD AND GRATEFUL LOVE.

LONDON,
April, 1879.

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A BROKEN BLOSSOM.

CHAPTER I.

ALONE.

I WAS alone—I felt it for the first time in my life—horribly and fearfully *alone*. Everything around me was unchanged, and yet nothing looked the same. The August sun streamed in mercilessly through the white window blind, lighting up every nook and corner of the commonly-furnished room. I had known those ornaments upon the chimney-piece for years past—that Parian figure of Innocence, pretending to be modest behind a rag of drapery about the size of a housemaid's duster—and that fine Court gentleman in imitation Dresden, who never left off beckoning to the lady who stood opposite to him, hiding her face coquettishly behind a fan. I had heard the tick of the carriage clock, which was one of the very few remnants left of our former luxury, ever since I could remember anything, without having noticed that it was particularly loud; and I had trodden and retrodden the green and red Brussels carpet beneath my feet without having observed that it was woven in the colours of a macaw. But now, as I sat in the armchair, with my hands folded listlessly upon my lap and my blistered eyes staring vacuously at all around me, the rag with which Innocence

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My eyes were dull and fishy; my complexion sodden; my hair rough and in disorder. I looked to myself like an old woman; older than *she* had done when I had seen her last with her own living face upon her.

It was a week now since she had left me—eight whole days; and I was still alive. It seemed marvellous to me!

I was not a young girl—I had completed my twenty-fourth year; and I knew, of course, that the majority of daughters were called upon to see their mothers leave this world before them. But then my mother had not been like other women's mothers. She was my friend and companion—my second self—the only confidante I had ever made. We had almost grown up together, for there were but eighteen years between us, and I felt utterly stunned and lost to think that she could go and leave me behind her—*alone.* How often we had talked together of leaving the rooms we had occupied so long at Norwood, and travelling, in the modest style our limited means would admit of, through Switzerland and Germany and France! Unless I married, meanwhile, she said with a smile (knowing well there was not a man on earth who had the power to separate me from her), we really must think of breaking up our English establishment this autumn, and making a move southward—that is, if Mr. Lovett approved of the plan.

Mr. Lovett was a personage of whom I had often heard, but never seen. He was a clergyman, and had been an intimate friend and schoolfellow of my late father, and my mother held his name in infinite respect. He was the trustee also of our small capital, and the quarterly interest of it always came to us through his hands. He lived abroad, which was the reason I had never met him, but his name was as familiar to me as a household word. If Mr. Lovett approved, then, my dear mother had said, we should travel together that autumn, and I had been looking forward to the novel pleasure with unmixed delight. And now, the autumn had not yet come, and she was—*where?* As these thoughts recurred to me, I pressed both my hands to my head to prevent my screaming aloud. It was too horrible—too dreadful—I could not realise it!

She had been so well, and we had been so happy, until two short weeks before. She was only forty-two years of age, and very youthful-looking ; our friends had often said, in jest, that I was the older and the graver of the two. She was a tall woman, with an unusually fine figure, and a bright speaking face that would have looked young to the last ; a soft, fair complexion, sunny blue eyes, and a mouth that was always ready for a kiss. She had a happy temperament, too, that ever looked on the brighter side, and was capable of taking the keenest enjoyment and interest in everything that was beautiful in Art or Nature.

If I had ever thought of death coming between us two, it was of dying myself, with my head on that dear bosom, and those kind eyes fixed on me to the last. But if *she* would have suffered in that instance as *I* had suffered during the past fortnight, I thanked God for singling me out as His victim.

At that phase of my existence I felt there was nothing else to thank Him for.

Eight days before, she had been with me, struggling, it is true, in the last throes of the fearful malady that separated us, but still there, with her dear blue eyes grown meek with suffering, turned lovingly to me, and her hot, fevered hand able to acknowledge the clasp of mine. And then arrived that awful moment when the light faded and the grasp relaxed, and they half pulled, half pushed me out of the room ; and something seemed to burst in my head, and make a thousand wheels, like the burring of machinery, go round and round in my brain, until they expended themselves like fireworks, and went out one after another, and my spirit escaped somewhere into a land of darkness and forgetfulness. As soon as I came to myself again, and they would let me leave my room, I rushed to *her*.

I could not believe but that she was still living : that she yet could open her eyes and look at me, or clasp my hand. I rushed into the room and ran straight up to the bed; but I had been absent for an hour, and the officious attendants had already what they termed 'laid her out.' I pulled off the sheet impetuously, intending to cast myself upon her breast, but drew back in horror.

That straightened flattened figure, like a bad model made in discoloured wax—those dark, closed, sunken eyes—that pinched and drawn-down nose—those livid, half-parted lips—they never belonged to the mother who bore me. As well assure me that the house I see fallen to decay, with clouded panes and shuttered windows and stained walls, is the same that I have passed when the sunlight played on every square of glass, and dainty lace curtains shaded, and many-coloured blossoms ornamented every sill. It was the casket that had once enshrined her soul, I knew; but that it was my mother, I never realised. It was my first view of the common change—so common and yet always so strangely new—and it was my first and last view of the shape that had held what was so dear to me. I clasped both my hands before my eyes, and fled from it in loathing. They called me unnatural and hard, and begged of me to look at it again; but no persuasions could induce me to re-enter the chamber. On the contrary, I sat in my own room, trying hard to forget I had ever seen it. I wanted to remember my mother at her best and brightest. I wanted to think of her as she had appeared to me as a little child—when I had thought her the cleverest and most beautiful and most wonderful of created beings—who knew everything and could do everything, and read my mind before I had expressed it. And I wanted to think of her as she had been to the last—my friend and companion, who sympathised in all my troubles and took pleasure in all my joy. And I felt as if the happier remembrance could never come back to me while *that* remained in the room that had been hers, lying stark and stiff upon the bed, or cased within its narrow coffin, with a sheet drawn over it to keep off the flies, and a few July roses lying prone upon its sunken surface. Ah ! how I suffered during those days of waiting, heaven and my own heart only knew. I longed for two things only : that the dreaded funeral might be over and done with, and I might be able to go away somewhere—no matter where, so long as the place was very distant from that in which I had been so miserable—and that I might never see any of the things again by which I was then surrounded.

And now one of my wishes had been realised, and I had followed the dark coffin to Norwood Cemetery, and seen it lowered into a grave dug in the grass. And I had come back to the house again, to find it still more empty than before.

That was yesterday. The people of the house had drawn up the blinds again, and the chamber in which she had died was having 'a regular turn out.' I could hear the maid-servants from where I sat, throwing the casements wide, and laughing with one another as they shook the bed and pillows, and smartly swept the carpet which had been innocent of broom so long. I heard them rattling the glass and china, and moving the furniture about the room, and my heart sickened afresh at the unusual sound of bustle. Pshaw ! what did it matter, after all ? They could not disturb her, lying six feet under ground in Norwood Cemetery ; and as for me, I must get used to such things. Yet, for all that, my lip was quivering terribly as a knock at the door caused me to turn from the looking-glass to confront my landlady, Mrs. Medlicott.

'Mr. Warrington wishes to speak to you, if you please, miss.'

Mrs. Medlicott's voice was unusually low and subdued. You would have thought, to hear her, that butter would not melt in her mouth; and to me, who knew how spiteful and shrill her tones could be on occasions, the change was irritating. What had happened to me more than to others, that a common lodging-house keeper should presume to show me compassion!

'Show him in,' I answered, almost sharply.

Mr. Warrington was my mother's solicitor. I had seen him at the funeral yesterday, as I had seen the rest of the mourners, through a sort of misty haze, but we had not spoken to each other. I knew he came to talk to me now about money, and my future mode of living, and my soul sickened at the mere idea; but nothing could make me worse than I was, so I said: 'Show him in.'

Mr. Warrington was not at all like the conventional family lawyer. He was a fashionable man in appearance, not more than forty, and always looked distinguished, in well-cut clothes, trimly-arranged hair, and a fresh bouquet in his button-hole. To-day it was composed of lilies of the valley and gardenias; and the faint smell of the latter blossom recalled to my mind, I could not tell why, the painful scene of yesterday, with so much acuteness, that I felt as though I must tear it from his breast and trample it under foot. But I schooled myself to raise my heavy eyes in his direction, and greet him with composure. Then we shook hands in complete silence.

'I trust I have not called upon you too early, Miss Marsh,' commenced Mr. Warrington; 'but I was anxious to see if I could be of any use, and also to have a little conversation with you about your money-matters.'

'Yes?' I said, interrogatively.

'I received a letter this morning, also, from your trustee, Mr.

Lovett, the contents of which he is desirous I should communicate to you. You have no personal knowledge of Mr. Lovett, I believe, Miss Marsh?'

'None whatever!'

'But you are aware, I suppose, that your—your late mother's income was derivable from a pension granted her on your father's death, in recognition of his scientific discoveries, and a sum of money vested in East India property which realised about one hundred and fifty pounds a year?'

'Yes; I have heard so.'

'The Rev. Horace Lovett, who was your father's most intimate friend, was left trustee for this small property during your mother's lifetime. At her death it was to revert, unconditionally, to you; but Mr. Lovett is still willing to continue his trust, if you wish it, and will re-appoint him to the charge.'

'I have no choice in the matter. You had better arrange it all, Mr. Warrington.'

'But shall I seem impertinent if I ask you what you intend to do?'

'I have no intentions of any sort.'

'You will not continue to live here?'

'Oh no! I suppose things will settle themselves in due time, and I shall drift on somewhere. It will be all "drifting" henceforward. I cannot look forward to "living" again.'

'No, no; of course not—not for the present; no one could expect it,' replied Mr. Warrington, soothingly. 'But you are too young to live alone, Miss Hilda.'

'Am I? Numbers live alone who are as young as I am. And I see no alternative.'

'There are several! Young ladies situated as you are, generally try to board with some pleasant family; or they have an older lady to live with them, and chaperon them into the world.

'I shall want no chaperonage,' I said sadly, recalling the arm on which I had leant for so many years; 'neither shall I go out into the world. I am only sure of one thing, that I must leave this place; but whether to go into a convent or on the stage is perfectly indifferent to me. I have no present, Mr. Warrington, and no future! All I desire to do is to forget.'

'Come, come! you mustn't talk to me in that strain,' he answered. 'I know it is quite natural, but it is not like the sensible, philosophical reasoning I have heard you exercise on the behalf of others. You have doubtless experienced a very heavy loss——'

'Mr. Warrington, will you be good enough not to speak to me about it? You may say what you like about myself, but nothing, please, that refers to the past.'

I dreaded breaking down before this hard, cynical man of the world, who looked upon death as the end of all things, and had frequently challenged me to prove to him, by even the feeblest argument, that the soul lived again after it had quitted the body.

'Very well, Miss Hilda,' he replied, nonchalantly; 'your wishes shall be respected in all things. But since you have formed no plans for yourself, may I be permitted to suggest one for you? Mr. Lovett writes me most feelingly on the subject this morning, and proposes that you should go, as soon as ever you please, to St. Pucelle, and form one of his family circle, as long as it suits your convenience to do so.'

'I go to St. Pucelle!' I exclaimed.

'Why not? It is a charming old-fashioned town, on the very frontiers of the Belgian territory, and Mr. Lovett's family consists of two motherless daughters, who would form pleasant companions for you. Mr. Lovett is not rich, as you may suppose. The salary of a Protestant clergyman abroad is barely sufficient to enable him to live in decent gentility; but he offers, should you go there, to hand you over fifty pounds annually for your own expenses, and I do not think that you will easily find a pleasanter or cheaper home in which to establish yourself. And so eminently respectable, too; living in a clergyman's family, and under the guardianship of your trustee. I hope you will think of the proposal favourably.'

'To go to St. Pucelle!' I repeated vaguely. Thoughts of the foreign trip that *we* had planned together rushed rebelliously into my mind, and for a few minutes I could not trust myself to speak. But as the mental mist cleared off, I found the plan that Mr. Warrington had proposed a very feasible one.

'You *cannot* live alone,' continued the solicitor, earnestly. 'It is of no use discussing the question. You are too young, and, if you will forgive me for saying so, Miss Hilda, you are much too handsome, to set up housekeeping on your own account. You have your name, and the name of those who are gone, to consider, and I am sure you will never dream of doing anything that would have displeased them.'

'No, no,' I answered, hastily; 'but I must have time to think about it.'

I had no friends to consult upon the subject. I suppose there never was a girl who found herself more completely thrown upon the world than I did. My father had been an only child, and my mother had come from Australia. Brothers and sisters, uncles, aunts, and cousins, were names unknown to me, except as they related to other people. I was literally my own mistress, and I felt terribly alone in remembering it—I, who had never felt alone in my life before. For the last few years I had believed myself to be so much of a woman, for my experience in some things had been greater than that of other girls, and *she* had made me her intimate companion, and unfolded all her mind to me as I had done mine to her. Now I felt like a little child that wanted advice and guidance, and had no one to depend on but herself. But Mr. Lovett's offer had opened new ideas to me, and I felt it was not to be rejected hastily.

'I suppose, if I go to St. Pucelle,' I continued, after a pause, 'that my stay there will be perfectly optional, and I shall be able to leave it whenever I choose?'

'Certainly. I can have no idea that Mr. Lovett wishes to keep you a prisoner there. The proposal is evidently made only with a view to your benefit, and I will make it a proviso in my answer that your actions are to be perfectly uncontrolled. But, at the same time, let me ask what you could possibly do, at your age, in the world by yourself?'

'Oh, don't worry me!' I said, impatiently; 'there are a thousand things I could do if I chose, and I will never stay in any family whose habits are uncongenial to me. I have been used to have my own way too much for that!'

Mr. Warrington rose, and commenced smoothing down the nap of his hat, which the crape band of yesterday still encircled.

'Very good, Miss Marsh! Then I will leave you to consider the matter at your leisure, and I hope you will give me the first intimation of your decision. I presume you have sufficient money in hand for current expenses?'

'Yes, yes; I have everything I want,' I answered. I was longing for him to be gone, and leave me to myself. Every moment he stayed recalled the past so vividly to me. After a few more words of courtesy, he bowed himself deferentially out of the room, and I was once more alone.

CHAPTER II.

REFUSED.

As soon as he had disappeared, I sat down in my chair and began to think. I might just as well do it then as at any other time. There was nothing for me to do. All my occupation seemed gone for ever. It would have been better if I had been one of the housemaids who were beating up the bed on which she died, with so much cheerful energy; or if I had had a little brother or sister, anyone dependent on me, for whom I should have been obliged to order meals and bestir myself to amuse or to attend to. But my time was too much my own. Mrs. Medlicott, in deference to my loss, sent up my dinner even without the least reference to me. I had not the poor distraction of annoyance or trouble to divert my thoughts from the great void that had been suddenly made in my life. So I sat with my head buried in my hands, and pondered upon St. Pucelle. The idea of going there, although not positively agreeable, attracted me more than any that had passed through my brain yet. Naturally, I had thought a little of my future. In the pauses when grief had spent itself, and I had wept till I was in a state of insensibility to everything, I had more than once wondered, in a dull sort of way, what was to become of me; but, as I had told Mr. Warrington, whether I went into a convent or on the stage was a matter of perfect indifference. All I wanted was to change my outward surroundings: not to be obliged every morning to pass the closed bedroom door which I had been accustomed to enter with an affectionate greeting; not to have to sit down at the same table where a chair had always been placed opposite to mine, and eat my meals in solitude; not, in fact, to have my heart torn every minute by those seeming 'nothings' which make up the happiness or the misery of every human life.

St. Pucelle could have no power to remind me of all this, although I knew that in my inmost heart I should never forget it. But there I should be in a totally new country—amongst a set of strangers—far from everything connected with the bitter suffering I was undergoing now.

The thought, instead of intimidating me, gave me courage. I seemed to breathe freer when I had decided to accept Mr. Lovett's offer of a home at all events, for the next few months; and I rose, with the first semblance of interest I had experienced in anything since *she* left me, to find an old atlas which was stowed away amongst our small collection of books, and see if St. Pucelle was of sufficient importance to be marked anywhere upon the frontiers of Belgium. I found it, very much screwed up in a corner, it is true, but still distinct enough to be read, close to the Valley of Artois, and on the borders of the celebrated Forest of Piron. The afternoon was merging, by this time, into the dusk of evening, and I was just about to ring the bell and desire the servant to light the lamp, when my attention was attracted by an altercation going on in the hall. Mrs. Medlicott was apparently, if one might judge by sounds, fighting with some one who wished to effect an entrance to her domains.

'You can't come in, sir,' I heard her say, after a long consultation. 'I couldn't think of it. She ain't fit to see no one—and won't be for days—that's my opinion; and if she was, I'm quite sure as she would never dream of admitting a gentleman at this hour. Why, it's as near dark as can be—and Miss Marsh quite alone, as she is too.'

'Only for a minute!' pleaded a young fresh voice.

Why! it was Charlie—dear old Charlie Sandilands, and she was actually sending him away! Something rushed up to my throat and my eyes, and I felt as if I *must* see him; as if it would do me all the good in the world to look in his honest eyes and feel the warm grasp of his hand. What Mrs. Medlicott thought of my propriety I do not know, but I flew to the drawing-room door, and opening it just wide enough to allow of my voice being heard, exclaimed:

'Yes, Charlie, come in; I should like to see you;' which caused him quickly to pass the irate landlady on the doormat, and enter my apartment.

I had met Mr. Warrington with dry eyes and a composed voice, and I had intended to do the same by Charlie Sandilands. But we had had so many happy evenings together, when *she* had been present, to laugh at the absurd devotion which this foolish young man persisted in paying me, that the contrast between them and the position in which I now stood struck me too forcibly, and instead of taking the hand he extended to me, I retreated to my armchair again, and burst into a storm of tears.

I had not set eyes on Charlie since she had been attacked with her fatal illness, although his dear good mother had come to me as soon as she had heard of my trouble, and remained with me to the end. All that had happened since we met last, and all the sad details of which we must speak together, overwhelmed me, and for a few minutes I could do nothing but cry. But then I held out my hand to him, without raising my head, and said:

'Oh, Charlie! you must not think I am not glad to see you; but you know how much I loved her, and how very miserable I must be.'

'Yes, of course, I know all about it,' he answered, in an awkward manner (men do feel so strangely awkward in the presence of a weeping woman whom they have no right to console); but please don't mind me, Hilda. I will go away at once, if you wish it; but I thought I would like to see you, if I could, and tell you how sorry we all are about it.'

'Don't go away just yet,' I murmured. 'I shall be all right presently. We will have a cup of tea together, and that will do me good. I am not often so silly as this, Charlie; for, after all, what is the good of crying? It cannot bring her back again.'

The poor boy looked very uncomfortable at my sad words, of which there was no refutation, and tried to cover their effect by ringing the bell for me. I call him a boy, because we had always looked upon and spoken of him as such, but in reality he was only two years younger than myself. He was the eldest of a large family of children belonging to a widowed friend, and we had been such near neighbours for several years, that we were very intimate. Scarcely a day had passed without our seeing or hearing something of the Sandilands; and Charlie, who was a clerk in Somerset House, and spent all his days in London, had been used to walk in and out of our little room in the evenings like a tame cat. We made nobody of Charlie Sandilands; and though his mother and mine had had many a laugh over his flirtation with me, I looked upon him quite in the light of a brother or a cousin, and took what liberties with him I chose.

When the tea made its appearance, we drank it so silently, that I observed at last that I thought we were holding a Quakers' meeting.

'I saw you and your brothers in the cemetery yesterday, Charlie,' I continued, with an effort, believing that if I did not break the ice I should never be able to speak to him at all; 'and I thought it so kind of you to come.'

'There was no kindness in it, Hilda. I would not have been absent for worlds.'

'Well, I thought it kind. I suppose one feels small attentions at such times more than at others. And *she* was very fond of you, Charlie. She used to call you "the blue-eyed baby."'

'She was always too good to me, I know that. Though I am not much of a baby, Hilda. I shall be twenty-three next birthday.'

'What of that? It is experience, not years, that makes our age. You will always be a baby, I think. Your mother has spoiled you so.'

'Oh, come, that's not fair! She spoils Willy and Herbert twice as much as she does me! Not that I'm jealous of it, for I hate being coddled.'

'Ah, don't hate it, dear. You may live to miss it, as I am doing now.'

'Mother sent her best love,' Charlie went on rapidly, feeling he had made a blunder; 'and said, if it would be any comfort to you, she would be so glad if you would come to us for a few days—or for as long as you like.'

'I couldn't, Charlie, thank you. It is very kind of your mother, and you must tell her so; but I would rather be alone. Besides, I have work to do at home.'

'You could be as much alone as you liked with us. I'd be sorry for the one who would dare to disturb you. And until your affairs are settled, and all that sort of thing, wouldn't it be better for you, Hilda, to stay with friends, than in these lodgings by yourself?'

'My affairs are already settled, Charlie. I am going to live with my father's old friend, Mr. Lovett, at St. Pucelle.'

'*What?*' cried poor Charlie, thunderstruck at my announcement.

'I am going abroad,' I said, with the selfish indifference that a great trouble gives us to other people's pain. 'I could not stay in Norwood, you know. I should go mad before a month was over my head; and my greatest desire now is to lose sight of it at once and for ever. Its very name is hateful to me.'

'Oh, Hilda! is it possible you are going to leave us?' he said, in a voice of despair.

'Why, you could never have imagined I should remain here. I have suffered too much for that. I have no home now, and no friends; and I must try and begin a new existence for myself, if that is possible, where I can wipe out the memory of the past as soon as may be.'

'What will Norwood be without you?' he exclaimed.

'Oh, Charlie, don't be so ungrateful, when your good mother will still be here, and all your brothers and sisters! Do you think if I had a mother and a home circle left to me, as you have, that I should give more than an ordinary regret to the departure or arrival of mere friends, however pleasant their company might be?'

'It is quite different, Hilda. You are not a mere friend to me, and you have known it for a long time past.'

This was one of the speeches which a month ago I should have laughed at merrily, and called him a saucy boy for making. But there was a mournful earnestness in his voice to-day, that, added to the solemnity of my own feelings, forbid my even smiling at him.

'Please don't talk like that,' I said quietly; 'the time is past with us for jesting.'

'But it is no jest, Hilda; it is truth—reality! I have loved you for years. Oh, don't leave Norwood! Stay with us, and let my mother be your mother, and make me happy. I should be so very, very happy if you were my wife.'

'*Your wife!*'

The idea seemed sacrilege to me. But the poor boy took my vehement surprise for anger.

'Oh, I ought not to have said anything about it now. It is unseemly, indecent. I have given you pain. But do forgive me, Hilda. I had not the least intention of offending you. It slipped out of my mouth before I was aware of it. The news of your departure was such a dreadful blow!'

'I am not angry,' I replied. 'I do not see why the presence of a great grief should make it indecent to speak of love. It is at such times we want love most. But it can never be spoken of between you and me, Charlie—not seriously; and so I am very sorry you ever spoke of it at all.'

'Is it impossible, then, that you could ever marry me, Hilda? I have two hundred a year already from Somerset House, and the salary increases annually. I know it is very little, but I could contrive to keep you in the same style in which you have been living, and my mother would take you to her heart as another daughter.'

I was so troubled for the poor young fellow. I looked up into his blue eyes, and they were actually swimming in tears. I felt I had been a heartless brute to let him go on loving me all this time, and think that it was play. But I could no more have got up a semblance of passion for him, than I could for the table which divided us.

'Charlie!' I said, 'if you had two thousand a year it would make no difference to me. I shall never marry anyone. My heart was all hers, and it will lie in her grave till we meet again.'

'You think so now, but you will alter your mind by-and-by, perhaps.'

'Nothing can alter it. And I feel very angry with myself to think that I should have let you grow fond of me, and never found out you were in earnest.'

'*In earnest!* It is the hope of my life. And I will never give it up until one of us is dead and buried.'

'What am I to do to convince you it will be of no use?' I said despondingly. 'If you will give me your solemn promise of secrecy, Charlie, I will tell you something that I have never told to a single soul, except to *her;* and that I would cut my tongue out sooner than tell you, unless it were to try and repair the wrong which, it seems, I have done you.'

'You have never done me any wrong,' replied the poor boy, with the generosity of a true affection. 'You didn't mean it, Hilda. It is all my own fault.'

'But I won't allow that, Charlie. I have not laid myself out to attract you, it is true; but I am older than you are, and I should have remembered what our intimacy might lead to.'

'You seem to harp a great deal on the fact of there being a couple of years' difference in our ages; but if a man is not a man at two-and-twenty, he never will be.'

'Well, I am going to show you now that I consider you to be a man, and to treat you as such. I have told you that there is a reason why I shall never marry you nor anyone; and that reason is because—because——'

It was much harder to tell than I had imagined it would be. I felt so much for poor Charlie's disappointment, that I thought I could make any sacrifice in order to salve his wounded feelings ; but nothing is so mortifying to a woman as to have to confess that she has loved in vain.

'Don't go on if you don't wish to,' said Charlie, with ungrammatical consideration, as I paused to gain a little courage.

'Oh yes ; I mean to tell you, that you may be sure that my refusal has nothing to do with yourself.'

'You care for somebody else !' he exclaimed intuitively.

'No, I don't,' I said, reddening up under the consciousness of telling a lie ; 'but I did—that is, I used to—I mean that years and years ago I met some one in whom I was very much interested, as you are in me, and I thought things would have been all right between us ; but they never were, and so I shall be Hilda Marsh to the end of my days.'

'Is that *all?*' said Charlie, evidently disappointed at so tame a love-story. 'I shouldn't lose heart over that, Hilda ; you'll meet the fellow again some day, and come to an understanding with him ; or perhaps you'll forget him, and learn to think of me instead.'

'How utterly I must have failed to make you comprehend my meaning,' I replied. 'Do be convinced, once and for ever, Charlie, there can be no question of love for me, in this world, again.'

'Is he dead, then ?'

'Yes, he is dead—at least to me.'

My face burned as I uttered the words. Charlie received them with a look of blank dismay. Then he said :

'All this has made me feel very miserable, Hilda. I think, perhaps that I had better go home.'

'Yes, Charlie, I wish you would. It can do you no good to stay here, and the sight of your home may make you feel that there are people less lucky than you are.'

We shook hands in silence, and he crept quietly out of the house. I was very sorry for him, for I knew I possessed influence over him, and I was afraid that he might find some difficulty in shaking it off again. It was as well for him as for myself that I had determined to leave Norwood. The conversation I had just held had recalled Cave Charteris powerfully to my mind; and for some time after Charlie had left me, I sat pondering over that epoch in my life, which was so entirely closed and done with, but which yet had left such ineffaceable marks behind it.

It had happened five years before; but the remembrance was as fresh as yesterday. I had always believed myself most to blame in the matter, whilst my dear mother had unhesitatingly attributed all the wrong to him. But then I had loved the man, and she had only viewed him through the misery he had caused me. I had told Charlie Sandilands but half the story; it would have blistered my lips to let him know the whole truth.

But from my heart I could have no secrets. As I sat by myself that evening, I recalled every expression of Cave's handsome features, every tone of his thrilling voice, as he lingered, day by day, in our little drawing-room, or accompanied us in our walks, or on our journeys to town.

I had believed so fully then, and so had *she*, that the most momentous period of my existence had arrived, and that all those walks and talks could end but in one way—the declaration of Cave Charteris's love for me.

For why else had he, over a period of months, attached himself to our side as though he had a right to accompany us everywhere? I had no doubt on the subject, and permitted myself to love him without limit; and my mother looked upon him as her future son, and hailed every good trait in his character as a fresh guarantee for my happiness. And so we had gone on, in our blind belief, until one day, after he had been absent for about a week, I received an affectionate letter from him, claiming my congratulations on the score of his father having, at last, withdrawn his refusal to consent to his travelling on the Continent for a couple of years, preparatory to his entering the profession of the law. And from that hour I had never heard from him again. His philandering after me proved only to have been the expression of an impatient spirit waiting restlessly to hear its doom, and anxious, meanwhile, to make the weary hours pass away by any means that came easiest to hand.

I know that heaps of women must have deceived themselves after this fashion, and felt it as keenly, perhaps, as I did; but it seemed to me, in my inexperience of pain, as if nobody had ever suffered so much in this world before.

My dear mother might rave against the dishonour of Mr. Charteris's behaviour to me as freely as she chose, but we two poor unprotected women had no remedy against it. We could only fly into each other's arms, and weep over it until we could weep no more. I poured out all my soul to my one true friend and companion, and then we made a compact never to speak of his name to one another again, unless the burden should become too heavy to bear alone.

It was out of this grief that the complete love and reverence I maintained for my lost parent had been finally cemented. Her tenderness and sympathy for me in the great trial of health and spirits that followed, had made her appear more like an angel than a woman in my eyes ; and at the time of her death, it is true that I would not have exchanged her love for that of any man. She had been my one great good in this world, and the Creator of the universe had seen fit to take it away. What wonder was it that both my heart and my soul were in a state of rebellion against Him?

CHAPTER III.

LAUNCHED.

BEFORE I went to bed that night I wrote to Mr. Warrington, telling him I had decided to accept Mr. Lovett's offer ; and before another fortnight was over my head, I was on my way to St. Pucelle. There was no reason for delay, and the few things I had to do, I hurried over as quickly as possible. We had always lived in furnished rooms ; one week's notice was sufficient to set me free from them. The books and articles that had belonged especially to my mother found house-room with my kind friend Mrs. Sandilands. The only possessions I carried away with me were her Bible and her portrait and my own limited wardrobe. I wanted to begin life anew, cumbered with as few reminders of the past as possible.

I did not think, though, that I should find parting with the grave in Norwood Cemetery so hard. I had believed myself to be too philosophical to care about leaving that, any more than the old books that Mrs. Sandilands had taken charge of. But when the time came to say good-bye to it, and that which lay in it, I found I was as stupid, commonplace and non-reasoning an animal as ever wept above an inanimate object that could neither see, hear, nor respond.

Mr. Warrington's cruel arguments came back to my mind, and I found myself wondering if the end of it all had really come, and I was tearing myself away from the only link that could ever bind me to her again. It was late in the evening, at the close of the last day I was to spend in Norwood, that I stole into the cemetery and found my way, less by sight than by instinct, to the heap of earth, as yet unsoftened by any grass, that covered her. It must be allowed to sink—so the sexton had informed me—before it could be decorated like the other graves.

To sink right down upon *her*—pressing, pressing, with its awful unyielding weight, upon the lid of the coffin which covered that dear dead face—dear, even in spite of its ghastly want of resemblance to that which she had borne in life. I had said good-bye to the Sandilands and all my friends in Norwood; this was to be the last farewell my lips should utter there.

I sank down upon the mound of clay, and wrestled with my agony alone. Where was she, this beloved mother of mine? Who could tell me, *without any doubt*, of her habitation, her occupation, or her final destiny? Was she really gone for ever, as Mr. Warrington would have assured me, resolved, body and spirit, into the dust out of which she had been made, and as effectually lost as the burnt-out candle, the particles of which have mingled with the air? Was there no place of meeting beyond this world where I should see and clasp her again? The parson would, of course, have answered 'yes;' but the attainment of his conventional paradise was saddled with so many conditions that I was hopeless of ever reaching it. *She* might have got there, with her angelic love and tenderness for all things, whether in heaven or on earth, but I knew myself to be unequal to following her footsteps. I sat on her grave stunned and hopeless. We had often talked of a future world together, and it had seemed easy to believe anything when her lips uttered it; but now that she had left me, I wanted *proof*, certain and unanswerable proof, of the truth of what I had been taught; and the foundation on which I had built my apparent trust had all crumbled under my touchstone like sand. I felt there was no proof, no certainty, only a vague hope for ourselves, which became a broken reed when we tried to find comfort in it under the loss of those we had loved. Everyone had conjured me to look forward to meeting her again. No one had given me one convincing argument that I should do so. I was surrounded by the dark, impenetrable mystery of death, and I got up from the grave and walked back to my lodgings in a condition of dull, sodden despair.

I was to meet Mr. Warrington the next morning, at twelve o'clock, at one of the large London wharves. He had been very anxious to accompany me to St. Pucelle, and deliver me safely into Mr. Lovett's charge, but I had refused his kind offices. In the first place, I was quite able to travel alone; in the second, I longed to find myself so. I had merely to cross to Antwerp, and take the train on from there to St. Pucelle—or rather to Artois, which was the nearest railway-station to it. I was sufficiently acquainted with the French language not to have the slightest doubt of being able to make my wants understood, and something struck me as very ludicrous in the idea of a little dandy like Mr. Warrington conducting a great, tall woman like myself across the water, and delivering me over to Mr. Lovett's care, as if I had been a child. So, after he had met me at the wharf, looking as fresh and trim, with an exquisite button-hole of white rosebuds and forget-me-nots, as if he were just about to take a stroll in the Park, and secured a berth for me, and paid my fare, and seen that my luggage was safely on board, I dismissed him with ungrateful alacrity, and felt a sensation of relief as the steamboat quietly glided down the river, and I saw him take off his hat to me for at least the sixth time, before he quitted the landing-stage.

'At last,' I said to myself, with a long-drawn sigh, 'I am free to forget. Everything about me—even to the dress I wear—is a novelty. I have positively nothing, except a piece of pasteboard and a book, that belongs to the past. Thank God for it!'

I forgot the heart I carried in my bosom. For a while I diverted myself by watching my fellow-passengers and trying to guess their histories. There were only about a dozen of them, and they were all collected upon deck. There was the conventional newly-married couple; I found them out at once, principally because everything the bride had on was new, even to the soles of her boots, which were almost as fresh as when they had left the workman's hands, and had evidently never trod the vulgar earth before that morning.

There were a mother and father with a couple of odious children, whom they permitted to run against the other passengers just as they chose, smearing their dresses with their sticky fingers, and staring rudely in their faces for five minutes together. They kept leaping up on the seats also, and leaning over the sides of the vessel, till I began to hope that one or both might disappear for ever under the water. No such good luck, however, was in store for us. To the end of the voyage the children were ubiquitous. They scrambled for food at the dinner-table, and long after they had been put to bed, re-appeared in their night-dresses to demand more fruit and biscuits.

If parents only would realise what an abominable nuisance their offspring are to everybody but themselves, they would not, perhaps, entail so many unnecessary invectives on their heads as they do. If there is one character in history with whom I have more sympathy than another, it certainly is Herod. My attention was diverted for a time from these horrid imps by a young girl dressed, as I was, in deep mourning, who sat by herself in a very subdued attitude at one end of the vessel. I found she was going, for the first time, to a foreign school at Ghent. She had lost her father, and was anxious to perfect herself in French and German, before attempting to earn her own livelihood as a governess. It was a melancholy prospect, I thought. I imagined myself the governess of two such children as were annoying the company now, whilst their mother complacently read a cheap novel, and felt sure that in such a case I should have ended my career upon the gallows. Had it been necessary for me to work for my bread, I would have been a housemaid, a cook, a shop-girl—anything rather than a governess or a nurse!

Two or three foreigners, seedy and dirty in appearance, were standing near me, and looking rather impertinently in my face, which gave me a desire to change my seat. I rose, with the intention of crossing the deck, when my hand-bag, which had been lying on my lap, fell to the ground.

Some one quickly picked it up and restored it to me. Not one of my seedy foreigners, but a bright-haired English lad of not more, I thought, than sixteen or seventeen years old.

'Do you wish to go downstairs?' he inquired politely; 'and may I help you?'

It was such a nice, frank, boyish voice and face, that I quite took to him.

'No, thank you,' I said; 'I only wish to sit on the other side of the boat.'

'I will find you a seat. It is much cooler there,' he answered, with alacrity.

My boy-gallant then accompanied me across the deck, and having arranged my plaid for me to sit down upon, ensconced himself by my side.

'We shall have a charming passage across this time,' he remarked, confidentially.

'Shall we? I know nothing of the tides. I have never crossed before.'

'Do you go by Calais, then?'

'No! This is the first time I have ever left England!'

He opened his round eyes to their utmost.

'Oh! I say! Why, I cross six times every year, and sometimes oftener.'

'Do you live abroad, then?'

'No! I live in London—at least, my dad does—but I'm coaching for the Civil Service, with old Felton, at Rille, and run home at Christmas and Easter and Midsummer. I'm just going back after the summer vacation. Isn't it a bore?'

'Dreadful!' I acquiesced. 'But is not Rille near Artois?'

'About twenty miles distant. Why?'

'Only that I am going to Artois, or near it.'

'That's jolly! I'll look after you and see you get there all right, as you've not been used to travelling—that is, if you'd like me to.'

'Thank you, very much.'

I could not help inwardly smiling to think that I, who had so scornfully rejected the escort of the polite and experienced Mr. Warrington, should be thanking a raw schoolboy for the offer of his valuable protection to Rille. But the cordial unconventionality of the lad pleased me, and I thought I should like to have him for a travelling companion.

'It is not much of a journey from Antwerp to Rille,' I said.

'Only a couple of hours. We shall get in about eight o'clock to-morrow morning, and there's a train at half-past which will land me at my shop by half-past ten, and you at Artois at eleven. I pity you staying at Artois; it's a horrid dull place.'

'Oh! I am not going to remain at Artois. My friends live a little farther on.'

As he saw I did not volunteer the information, his intuitive delicacy forbad his asking me the name of my friends, or of myself. But he frankly disclosed his own.

'My dad's name is Sir John Stephenson. Dare say you've heard of him. He's a bigwig in the doctor way. He wanted me to be one. He said, "Fred, my boy, there's nothing like the medical profession." But I didn't see it—I don't fancy cutting off arms and legs—should you?'

'No, indeed! And so your name is Frederick Stephenson?'

'Yes! And I've got two brothers, Bob and Ernest; but they're quite little chaps.'

'I suppose I must tell you my name in return, especially as we shall travel to Rille together. I am called Hilda Marsh.'

'That's an awfully jolly name—Hilda, I mean. I've got three sisters, and they have rather nice names, I think: Jessie and Amy and Blanche, but "Hilda" beats them all to smash.'

'I am glad you think so! Do you like living at Rille?'

'Pretty well, but I shall be very glad when I've done with it. We have larks now and then, but old Felton's the clergyman there, and awfully stiff with us. He hardly ever lets us go into the town.'

At this juncture the dinner-bell rang, and my young friend was all alert to obey it.

'Won't you come down?' he urged. 'They give very good spreads on board this boat, and if you're likely to be ill when we get out to sea, you'll be all the worse for not having eaten anything.'

But I could not join them at the dinner-table. I had not sat down to a regular meal for weeks, and the idea of roast and boiled joints sickened me. I persuaded Master Fred Stephenson to leave me where I was, whilst he satisfied the cravings of nature, to look at the charming sights which presented themselves on either side the river, which we were now fast leaving for the open sea.

By six o'clock we were well out in the ocean, which was calm as a lake at that time of year; and I shrank with dismay at the idea of quitting the cool sweet-smelling deck for the stuffy cabin, to which I had been introduced in the former part of the day.

'Why should you?' exclaimed Master Fred, to whom I had confided my grievance; 'we'll have a mattress and pillow sent up on deck for you, and you'll sleep twice as well here as you would below. I'll go and speak to the captain at once about it.'

He strode off with the air of a man, before I had time to dissuade him from asking for what appeared to me an impossible indulgence. However, his application was speedily followed by the appearance of a seaman bearing the mattress, pillows, and blankets ; and when I saw several others of the passengers making themselves comfortable for the night in the same manner, I grew less shy of using my improvised couch, and was thankful to rest upon it.

As I lay there through the dark night, gazing up into the faces of the moon and the stars, I could hardly believe that every throb of the machinery was carrying me farther and farther away from the scenes with which I had been associated so long. It was a lonely, peaceful sensation, that of being borne along upon the lapping waves and through the cool night air without any exertion, and only the burr of the steamer's wheels, and an occasional order from the captain to intimate that some one was watching over my safety whether I slept or not. I lay thus for some hours, thinking the one great thought that never left my brain then, by night or day, until at last fatigue overcame me, and I fell asleep. I woke with a sensation of being stifled. There was no light, no air, nothing. What had happened to me? I struggled violently for a moment, when some one, with a gay laugh, suddenly twitched a blanket off my face, and I was free to breathe again.

'Holloa! Miss Marsh,' exclaimed Fred Stephenson, 'did you think you were buried alive?'

'Something very like it,' I replied ; 'what happened to me?'

'Only this, that when the dew began to fall this morning, I drew the blanket over your face. It isn't safe to sleep in it, you know, and everyone is covered up in the same way.'

'Well, it was very kind of you to think of it,' I said, 'but I certainly thought we were all going to the bottom. How still the sea is!'

'We've been out of the sea for the last four hours. We are going up the Scheldt now, and shall be in Antwerp before you've had time to have your breakfast and make a comfortable toilet.'

I scrambled to my feet at this intelligence, and sought the shelter of my cabin, which felt closer and more stuffy even than it had done the day before. A cup of coffee woke me completely up again, and by the time the boat steamed alongside the quay at Antwerp, I was on deck, ready to admire or be surprised at every fresh thing I saw. Master Fred Stephenson proved an admirable cicerone, and never ceased to call my attention to everything that he thought would interest or amuse me.

'Aren't those rum houses and trees?' he said in his schoolboy language, as he pointed out some quaint buildings on the quay; 'they look for all the world like the contents of one of those German boxes of toys the children get at home, set up on end. And that's a milk-cart drawn by that dog, with all those brass cans in it. Did you ever see such caps and bonnets as the women wear! I tried to squash one of their bonnets once by sitting on it, but it was no use. They're as hard as wood. Holloa! here come the Custom-house people to look at the boxes. If you will let me have your keys, Miss Marsh, I'll see your luggage passed. I suppose you've got nothing to declare.'

I assured him I had not.

'Well, I've got lots, but I'm blessed if they shall find them. I smuggle more things, every time I cross, than the rest of the

English pupils put together; but I'm an awfully lucky fellow, and have never been caught yet.'

I stood on the bridge to watch the Custom-house officers at their duty, and found it a very amusing sight. The distinction they made between searching the luggage of their own countrymen and that of mine, inspired me with a feeling of pride that, notwithstanding Master Fred's peccadilloes, the word of an Englishman should be so readily taken.

I observed that when the bridegroom and the father of the obnoxious children had simply said they had nothing in their boxes liable to duty, the keys were returned to them after the merest feint had been made of raising the lids. But no such declarations availed the seedy foreigners, though they accompanied them with oaths. Their scanty apparel, very yellow and shabby in appearance, was religiously displayed on deck for the admiration of the rest of the passengers, and every crevice of their trunks carefully searched; and I felt sincere pity for one poor wretch who was compelled to turn out the whole contents of an enormous hamper, which was found, after all, to contain nothing but apples and pears.

When it came to the turn for Master Fred's boxes, he threw his keys to the Custom-house officers in the most nonchalant manner, desiring him to search for himself.

The consequence of which was that, the trouble promising to prove too great, the keys were merely turned in the locks and delivered again to their owner.

'That's the way I do them, Miss Marsh,' said Master Fred, with the greatest glee, as we drove together to the station. 'There's nothing goes down in this world like a perfect absence of fear. If you try to prevent those fellows from rumpling your collars, they turn everything over in order to find your contraband goods; but if you tell them to look for themselves and not bother you, they feel sure directly that innocence alone can make you so brave.'

'You are a very naughty boy,' I said, smiling in spite of myself at his self-assurance and British cheek.

CHAPTER IV.

ST. PUCELLE.

BUT notwithstanding his youth, I found Master Fred Stephenson not only entertaining, but useful, for he took all trouble off my hands, and before long I found myself sitting by his side in a *coupé*, and travelling fast towards Rille and Artois. He rattled on, in his boyish manner, of his school-life and pursuits, mingling his discourse with more than one tale of scandal concerning the English abroad.

'You should not repeat such stories, young man,' I said reprovingly, 'whether they are true or not.'

'Oh! they deserve everything one can say of them, Miss Marsh. You never saw such a lot—greedy, grasping, ill-natured, and tale-bearing. They seem to live only to cheat each other and pick holes in their neighbours' characters. I am generally ashamed to meet any of my countrymen on the Continent. And the way they dress, too! I wonder, for my part, that any of the tradesmen trust them. Now there's an old card who's a great chum of Felton's—to see him and hear him talk, you'd think he was a perfect saint; but just listen to the tales that are told of his being in debt all over the place, and fleecing young men out of their money! Oh! criminy!'

'Perhaps they are not all true,' I suggested mildly, for as we neared my destination I began to feel rather nervous at the prospect of meeting my unknown friends, and less well disposed to listen to the social scandal Master Stephenson amused himself by retailing to me. 'Were we not rather late in starting? It is nearly half-past ten now, and we are several stations yet from Rille. I wonder if Mr. Lovett has received my letter to say I should start yesterday.'

'Mr.—*who?*' exclaimed Fred Stephenson.

'Mr. Lovett, the Protestant minister of St. Pucelle. He is my trustee, and a sort of guardian. It is at his house that I am going to stay.'

'Well, I *am* blowed!' ejaculated my elegant young friend.

'Do you know him, then?'

'*Know him!* Of course I do! Everybody knows him within fifty miles of Artois. He was tutor, or guardian, or something of the kind, to the young German Prince Francius von Rudelstein de Ritzburg, and spends half his time at court. He is considered quite a swell in his way, and is often over at Rille. And so you're going to St. Pucelle! What a lark!'

I could not exactly see in what the 'lark' consisted; but I thought it a singular coincidence that my young travelling companion should be acquainted with Mr. Lovett.

'Perhaps you will be surprised to hear that I have never seen him yet. What is he like?'

'Oh, a very fine-looking old fellow, with snow-white hair and the most benevolent of countenances! He's got two jolly daughters, too.'

'I am glad to hear that, because I am likely to see much more of them than of their father. What are their ages?'

'I can't tell you that, because I'm not sure; but I should think the eldest must be about your age, and her sister a few years younger. They're both pretty; Tessie has fair hair and a nice tall figure, but the little one's darker.'

'Have you seen much of them?'

'No; very little; only when they came to Rille with their father, to be confirmed. But, by Jove! here's the old shop itself. I'm so awfully sorry I can't see you safe to Artois, Miss Marsh, but it's only three stations farther on, and the diligence will be in waiting to take you on to St. Pucelle. Good-bye! I'm so glad I met you! Hope we shall soon meet again! Shouldn't wonder if old Felton lets me run over to Piron for a day's shooting this autumn. No; no thanks. I'm so glad I was able to do anything for you!'

And, with a wave of his hat and many smiles, the nice, frank-hearted boy ran away to greet a group of his schoolfellows, who were assembled on the platform. The last I saw of his happy face, as the train moved slowly out of the station, was a succession of nods; the last I heard of his joyous voice, a hearty '*Au revoir.*'

'Well, he had been much comfort to me on my first essay at traversing the world alone, and I was thankful I had encountered him. Now he was gone, and I turned my thoughts entirely to the meeting which lay so short a way ahead of me.

When I arrived at Artois, I found, as he had told me, a diligence in waiting to take all passengers and luggage on to St. Pucelle. This conveyance, so fast becoming extinct upon the Continent, excited much of my interest. It is true that it had no springs, and jolted along the rough country-road to such an extent as nearly to jolt me into pieces ; true, that the four little mules that drew it, decorated with scarlet woollen tassels and jingling with bells, required a constant succession of oaths and cracks of the whip to make them move out of a walk, and often stopped dead of their own accord, notwithstanding their driver's energy. I was wedged in tightly, also, on a broiling August morning, between some fat market-women, who regarded my foreign appearance with curious wonder, and, opposite, a set of men who puffed smoke in my face with the utmost nonchalance. But the diligence was making its slow, uneven way on a road cut in the side of a hill. On one hand lay the lovely fertile valley of Artois, through the green bosom of which a river was winding its way like a silver snake, glistening in the sunlight. On the other was a high hill, which looked almost like a mountain in my inexperienced eyes, and was covered to the top with purple heather, precisely similar to that we find in England and Scotland, intermingled with wild-flowers of every form and colour. I was wrapt in admiration of the view. I gazed from right to left in silent wonder, thinking I had never seen anything in my life before so beautiful and bright, and forgetful alike of the uncomfortable pressure I was enduring from my stout neighbours, and the vile tobacco-smoke which came puffing in my face from over the way. Subsequent experience made me aware that the journey from Artois to St. Pucelle, when performed in the diligence, occupied an hour and a quarter ; but it did not seem to have been half that time to me when the vehicle suddenly came to a standstill, and I heard a voice in parley with the driver.

The fat women looked at each other and murmured something about the '*Curé Anglais*;' and my curiosity was just being awakened by a few words of French which I had caught from outside, when an old gentleman came round to the diligence-door and looked in upon us.

'*Bonjour, monsieur!*' cried all its occupants, save one, simultaneously; and the new-comer raised his hat in reply to the general salutation. I thought I had never seen such a perfect picture of an old man before. His snow-white hair covered his finely-formed head in loose, wavy curls; his high forehead bore the impress of intellect and benevolence; and his bright blue eyes beamed forth from a face the complexion of which was soft and fair as that of a child. He had a tall, upright figure, rather stout than otherwise, and must have been, in his youth, an unusually handsome man. His long cloth coat and broad-brimmed hat told me his profession before he spoke, and I was delighted when I heard him demand, in English, if I were Miss Marsh.

'Am I speaking to Mr. Lovett?' I exclaimed.

'Yes, my dear, yes; no other. Your letter reached us safely this morning, so I thought I would walk a little way down the road to meet the diligence. I hope you have travelled here comfortably?'

'Very comfortably, thank you. But are we so short a distance, then, from St. Pucelle?'

'We are within a stone's throw of the town. There it stands, on the brow of the hill.'

'I should very much like then, if I may, Mr. Lovett, to walk back with you instead of driving.'

'By all means, my dear,' he replied, as he opened the door and helped me out of the vehicle.

A few words in French explained matters to the driver, and in another minute the diligence was lost to view in a cloud of white dust, and the Rev. Horace Lovett and I were left standing alone on the road to St. Pucelle. The first thing he did was to take my hand, and regard me steadfastly in the face.

'You are *very* like your poor father,' he said, 'both in feature and expression, and you will be all the dearer to me for the resemblance. Perhaps you have heard—you may have been told—what firm, fast friends we were in the olden days.'

'Oh yes, Mr. Lovett ; my mother has often told me so.'

'I did not know your poor mother,' he replied ; 'I was settled here before your father's marriage. But report has told me how good and amiable a wife he had gained in her.'

'She was indeed good,' I said falteringly. 'I seem to have lost everything I possessed in losing her.'

'Come, come, my child,' he said soothingly ; 'I should not have mentioned the subject to you so soon. Do not let us speak of it to-day. You have come to the house of your father's earliest and closest friend. You must try and think that it is a second father himself who welcomes you there.'

'Indeed you are very good to me,' I replied ; 'and I felt the kindness of your offer from the first, though I have scarcely thanked you for it.'

'You have thanked me in the best way possible, my dear, by accepting it. I have had two daughters hitherto ; now I shall have three. My little girls are all impatience to form your acquaintance ; but you must make allowances for them. You will find them rough little Wallons, who know nothing of England or English customs.'

'What is a Wallon, Mr. Lovett? I am afraid you will find me as ignorant of Continental ways and fashions as your girls are of English.'

'Then you must teach each other. We are in what they call here the Wallon country, my dear, which they would term in Scotland, I think, "neither fish, flesh, nor good red herrin'." The people hereabout speak a *patois* of French and German, rather difficult of comprehension at first, and which has considerably spoilt my little girls' accent.

We were now approaching the entrance of the town, which consisted principally of one long street built on a steep hill, so that to mount it almost seemed like climbing up stairs, especially as it was paved irregularly with grey rough stone. At the very summit of it stood an imposing-looking edifice built of granite, with a spire and cross lifted to the skies, which I concluded to be the church of which Mr. Lovett had charge. But he soon undeceived me.

'Oh no, my dear; you must not expect to see our faith honoured after that fashion in this country. That is the Catholic church, under the superintendence of my very good friend, the Abbé Morteville. I have offered to exchange with him more than once, but he has not taken the hint.'

'I should hardly have thought there had been sufficient Protestants in a town like this to render it worth while to keep up a church and minister for them.'

'No more there are. But my excellent friend and patron, the Grand Duke Francius von Rudelstein, interested himself on my behalf, and placed me here in order to attend to the spiritual wants of the summer visitors. We have a great many visitors to St. Pucelle in the summer season.'

'I don't wonder at it. It seems to me the loveliest place I have ever seen.'

At this juncture, a man dressed in a blue blouse, buckled round his waist, and a cap with a peak to it, ran out of a shop and button-holed Mr. Lovett, whilst he apparently pleaded for something, very volubly and earnestly, in his own language.

'Some parochial confidence,' I thought, as I saw my old friend move farther from my side, so as to take the man out of earshot. They spoke together for some minutes; the tradesman still pleading, and Mr. Lovett seeming to try and soothe him down to a quieter frame of mind. At last he prevailed. The man in the blouse smiled and raised his peaked cap, and Mr. Lovett, calling out cheerily, '*À demain*,' returned his smile in the most benevolent manner, and hastened to my side again.

'You will excuse me, my dear,' he said, 'but a minister is at the beck and call of all his parishioners.'

'Is that man a Protestant, then?' I asked with surprise.

I do not know why I should have been surprised, but he had looked so thoroughly unlike it.

'We have a regular mixture here,' replied Mr. Lovett, without answering my question. 'Do you see that house on the right hand, my dear child, with steps leading up either side to the porch? that is my humble abode, and that is where I hope you will make yourself very happy for a long time to come.'

I followed the direction of his silver-headed cane with a quick curiosity that the appearance of the house was well calculated to increase. It was built of wood, and looked to me more like the representations I had seen of Swiss châlets than any other sort of private dwelling. The principal door was reached, as Mr. Lovett had pointed out to me, by a double flight of wooden steps, with rails on the outer side of them. The windows were lattices, with diamond-shaped panes of glass. The house looked large and commodious, but it was so much built on a slope that the garden to one side of it was level with the windows of the first story; so that the lower rooms must consequently have been, in part at least, underground. The front was covered with a luxuriant union of vine, fig and pear tree, and the little garden to the side, which was visible above the top of the wall, was a mass of fragrant bloom. But what attracted me most was the figure of a girl, leaning over the rails which guarded the porch.

Her features did not strike me at first sight as being pretty, but there was a grace about her figure, and a sweet, fair womanliness in her face, that made me feel at once that we should be friends.

'Papa!' she called out, with a decidedly French pronunciation, as we drew near the porch.

Mr. Lovett looked up and shook his stick gaily at her.

'There is my Tessie,' he said proudly, 'the elder of the two; and as good a child as ever walked alone! And where is my little maid?' he continued to his daughter; 'has she run away to hide herself, in fear of this formidable stranger?'

'No, no, papa!' replied Tessie, laughing. 'Ange has gone up the hill to fetch some eggs from Mère Fromard. For we did not expect Miss Marsh would arrive so soon.'

I thought she was a daughter for any man to be proud of, as she came gracefully down the steps to meet me, and extended her hand in greeting. She was tall and slight, and clothed in a black stuff dress, with a broad white muslin apron on, fashioned with a bib that was pinned on either shoulder. Her fair, soft hair was taken loosely off her face and coiled in a knot behind her head, and her grey eyes—too small and too grey to be like her father's—beamed forth mildly from a complexion that was unusually delicate for a country-bred girl. But what struck me most in Teresa Lovett's face was the unmistakable look which betrayed that she had suffered—and seen others suffer—as I had. It was a bond of union between us that was cemented the first day we met, and will last until time is no more.

'Come, girls! kiss each other!' cried Mr. Lovett, as he watched the commonplace greeting with which we timidly touched each other's hand. 'That's right,' he continued, as we obeyed his directions; 'you must never forget that your fathers were more like brothers than friends in the olden time. God bless my soul! it's many a scrape I got in with Dick Marsh in our college days; and many a time we've hoped we should live to meet again, and have a crack over the past. But that wish has been overruled, so we must make the best of what remains to us. But if you girls don't get on together, I shall never forgive you. You are both motherless, and you've only got one father left between the lot of you; so it will be very hard if you can't cling together and make the rest of your lives as pleasant as may be.'

'We mean to try to do so, dear papa,' said Tessie, in her soft voice, as she gave me a second embrace, preparatory to leading me into the house. 'I am sure you must be tired,' she continued; 'do come in and rest.'

All this had taken place in front of the house, and in the very centre of the street; but then the street of St. Pucelle must not be judged by the rules of any other. It was just past noon.

The inhabitants of the town were unanimously partaking of their mid-day meal.

Not a passenger was to be seen from one end of the long thoroughfare to the other, and doubtless my new friends and I might have embraced for the next half-hour without observation. But I was beginning to feel very weary, and was glad to accept Tessie's invitation to enter and rest myself. My slumbers on board the boat had been but broken ones, and the fatigue of the excitement consequent on my journey was beginning to make itself apparent. So that I felt thankful when I had mounted the wooden steps which led to the hall-door, and realised that, for the time being, I had reached the end of my travels.

The door opened immediately upon a large room, the floor of which was but half covered by a threadbare carpet, in which it was impossible to trace even the remains of colour ; in the centre stood a deal table with a faded green cloth, round which were placed some half-dozen or more rush-bottomed chairs. A large oil painting of the Crucifixion hung over the narrow wooden mantelpiece, and was the only visible ornament. And a buffet covered with wine-glasses and tumblers stood to one side of the apartment, which I concluded to be the dining-room. I confess, though, that I was hardly prepared for the meagre appearance of its furniture, and I suppose Tessie guessed my surprise from the expression of my face.

'You must not expect to find all the customs of this country similar to those of England,' she said, with a touch of pride. 'Papa tells me you think a great deal of your furniture and rooms there, but no one does so in St. Pucelle. In the first place, there are so few people here to see and admire it ; and in the second, the servants would not know how to keep it in order. Not that we have always been so shabby as we are now,' she added, in a lower voice; 'but Ange and I were only babies when poor mamma died, and there has been no one to look after such things since. We don't care for ourselves—Ange and I—we would as soon sit on rush-bottomed chairs as on velvet; but it is sad for poor papa, who has been used to such a different life from this.'

CHAPTER V.

ANGE.

'ANGE is your sister's name, is it not?' I asked her.

'Yes. And you will like her so much. She is such a darling! She was baptised "Angela," but we have always called her Ange for short. The country people gave it to her first. She was so pretty, like a little angel, running amongst them with her golden curls, and they named her "*Petite Ange!*" And then we took it up, and she has been called so ever since.'

'It is a very pretty abbreviation! Is there much difference in your ages?'

'Five years. I am three-and-twenty, and she is but just eighteen. Am I younger than you?'

'By a twelvemonth only. I hope we shall be very good friends, Tessie—if I may call you so.'

'Yes, indeed you must; and I must call you by your name—

Hilda—since papa says we are to be sisters. But if you should find the life here too dull and stupid after England! That would be very sad for all of us, would it not?'

'Why should you anticipate it? I have not been accustomed to a gay life, Tessie. I lived all alone with my dear mother until—until——'

'Yes, yes, I know!' cried the girl, with ready sympathy.

'And, as you may imagine, I am hardly likely to wish to mix in scenes of gaiety now. All I want is rest and peace.'

'Shall we ever get it in this life?' inquired Tessie, in a low voice.

I looked up at her in astonishment

'I mean—I mean—' she went on confusedly, 'that I am not going to let you stand here any longer. Come and see the bedroom I have prepared for you.'

For we were still lingering in the barely-furnished dining-room by which we had entered the house. She led me through a second apartment, smaller than the first, but bearing more signs of occupation, having an old piano in one corner, a case of books in another, and a cage of canary birds singing loudly in the window. Then, to my astonishment, we entered a large stone kitchen, from which a flight of stairs led up to the bedroom floor. At the table in the centre sat an old Frenchwoman, shredding potatoes into a wooden bowl; but whether she was a servant or not I felt puzzled to decide. She wore a stuff gown, as good as Tessie's, with a scarlet worsted shawl, notwithstanding the heat, pinned tightly across her bosom, and a net-cap much ornamented with artificial flowers and ribbons, such as is never assumed by the lower classes in Belgium, except on Sundays and fête-days.

She did not look up, either, as we entered the kitchen, nor show any sign of noticing our presence until Tessie addressed her, as I thought, with some timidity.

'This is Miss Marsh, Madame; she has just arrived by the diligence, and I am about to take her up to her bedroom that she may refresh herself before luncheon.'

'Very good! You know your way there,' muttered the woman in French, going on with her occupation.

'We generally have our luncheon about this time,' said Tessie to me, 'but if you would like to take any refreshment beforehand——'

'What refreshment would you offer her, unless it be an apple and a glass of sour beer?' interrupted the potato-shredder, who appeared to understand English perfectly, although she spoke in French.

'Oh, Madame! we can surely find Miss Marsh a roll and a little butter,' replied Tessie, with a nervous laugh; but I assured her that I should need nothing until the family meal was announced.

I heard the Frenchwoman grumbling to herself as we ascended the stairs, and trusted that a close association with her would not form a necessary part of my new life.

'Madame Marmoret is not very genial with strangers,' remarked Tessie, as we entered a long bare corridor upon which the doors of the bed-chambers opened.

'Is she your housekeeper?' I inquired.

'She is our everything. She nursed me and Ange when we were babies, and has reared us ever since. She is the cook and the housemaid and the footman and the butler all in one. But she is a shocking tyrant, and Ange and I hardly dare call our souls our own when she says that we shall not.'

'Why don't you get rid of her, then?'

Tessie's eyes opened to their fullest extent.

'Get rid of Madame Marmoret! We should almost as soon think of getting rid of papa. Oh no! we shall never get rid of her, as long as we live. She is an "institution." She wouldn't go even if we asked her. She would turn us all out of the house first.'

To me, who possessed a strongly conservative spirit, and had no idea of permitting my inferiors to take a liberty with me, Tessie's mode of talking about Madame Marmoret appeared only as excellent satire. I was yet to learn that it was sad and sober truth. But we had arrived at my bed-chamber, and though I was a little disappointed at its want of size, all the bulk of the house seeming to be monopolised by passages and staircases, I could not help observing with gratitude the evident care that had been bestowed on the arrangement of the little white bed, and the muslin curtain that draped the window, and was touched beyond measure at the discovery of a small blue silk pincushion on the toilet-table, ready filled with pins, with 'Hilda' worked across the front of it in white beads.

'Ange did that,' said Tessie, delighted with my pleasure at the sight; 'she was making that all last week, especially for your table. She wanted to work a little cross beneath your name, but I would not allow her. I thought you might not like it.'

'Why not?'

'Because the English, as a rule, are so superstitious. They are afraid of a cross. One would think it portended evil. But Ange is so good—so pious! She would live in the church, if it were possible.'

'Is your church far from here?'

'Ah! I did not mean our church—I meant that of our good friend, Monsieur Morteville. No, it is not far off—it is just over the way. But it is not a church at all. It is only a room.'

My face fell. I had always greatly enjoyed the services of religion, especially where well conducted, and I felt I should need the comfort of them more than ever now.

There had been something in Mr. Lovett's manner and appearance—I know not why—that had led me to hope that I should derive much solace from being under his care. I suppose it was the look of extra refinement that had misled me. But Tessie's description of their place of worship was very discouraging.

'Only a room!' I echoed, in a tone of disappointment.

'Yes, and such an ugly one! It is a schoolroom on weekdays, and we have to sit on the dirty benches that the children use. I play the harmonium, and Ange leads the hymn, but it is sorry work. It will be better now you have come. I hope you will sing with us. Papa is grand, of course. He is grand whatever he does, or wherever you put him; but it makes me sad to see him thrown away in such a horrid place. I always feel he ought to be preaching in a splendid cathedral like St. Gudule, at Brussels. He looks altogether out of place with whitewashed walls.'

'St. Paul, in the upper room at Athens,' I said, smiling.

'Ah! St. Paul was never half such a man as our father. He ought to be Archbishop of Canterbury at the very least, or, as Ange says, Pope of Rome!'

'He is certainly a very fine-looking old gentleman,' I acquiesced.

'Do you think he looks *old?*' said Tessie. 'He never seems to grow old, to Ange and me. It would be a dreadful thing to wake up some day and find that papa had really changed into an old gentleman.'

I could not say he looked young, and so I discreetly held my tongue. I had not quite completed my toilette when a bell was heard to tinkle.

'I must go!' cried Tessie. 'That is Madame ringing the bell for me to lay the table for *goûter*. You see, Ange and I are obliged to help her in these little matters, or she could not get through her work. Do you think you can find your way downstairs again, Hilda, without me?'

'I am sure I can,' I answered; and in a few minutes more I proved my words by following her through the kitchen to the apartment which held the piano. There I found her busily employed in laying the luncheon-table, and singing a little French song as she worked.

The repast was a very simple one, but it looked inviting. There was a loaf of rye bread, a country cheese, a large basket of rosy apples, a bowl of custard, and a plate of *gaufres*, which Tessie told me she had made herself. Everything was beautifully clean, but there was evidence of strict economy, if not of poverty, in the arrangements, which, remembering what I had been told of the Reverend Horace Lovett's grand patrons and connection with court, rather surprised me. However, I was no gourmand, and did not give a second thought to the matter. As soon as the *goûter* was prepared, Madame Marmoret went out at the front door and rang a handbell violently on the balcony, which was shortly followed by the sound of her master's voice and footsteps as he obeyed the signal to return home.

'There is papa!' exclaimed Tessie, 'and there—yes! there comes Ange with him! I thought she could not be much longer. They must have met in the street.'

At this moment Mr. Lovett, his face beaming with kindly benevolence, appeared on the threshold of the room we sat in, dragging a girl after him by both her hands held in one of his.

'Here she is,' he said ; 'here's my little maid, Hilda. I found her hiding somewhere away in the cow-house, afraid to show her face indoors for fear you would bite her nose off ; and I believe she would have stayed there till to-morrow morning if I had not chanced to come across her.'

'No, no, papa ! indeed,' remonstrated Ange, with the same foreign accent I had observed in her sister, 'you are not just to me. I am not afraid : I was only going round to give the eggs to Madame, and take off my hat before presenting myself to Mademoiselle Marsh.'

He swung the girl in front of him, and nearly pushed her into my arms.

'Go and present yourself to Mademoiselle Marsh, then,' he said, mimicking her pronunciation.

As she stood before me, with her heightened colour and a deprecating look upon her face, I thought I had never seen such a pretty creature before as Mr. Lovett's 'little maid.' She was dressed in black serge, like her sister, and had a white muslin pelerine crossed quaintly over her bosom ; a straw hat, with a black ribbon tied round it, and a wide flapping brim that almost hid her features, formed her head-dress, and a plain silver cross, depending from her throat, was her only ornament. But how shall I ever describe her face ! that mobile face, the expression of which changed every second, like a restless sea that never can keep still ; and that delicate variable bloom, that rose and fell in crimson waves with every emotion that passed through her sensitive little brain! In actual appearance she was very like the old man, which accounted for his evident pride in her. She had his rich blue eyes, with long dark lashes and well-marked eyebrows: the chestnut hair—which I afterwards learned he had also possessed when young—with a natural wave in it like his, that kept it rippling low on her brow and the nape of her neck and round about her ears in little sunny curls. The tip of her pretty nose was just sufficiently tilted to redeem it from being aquiline, and her laughing mouth, displaying a row of firm white teeth, was childlike in its dewy rose-leaf bloom.

I am not given to falling into raptures over the perfections of my own sex: few women are, in this century of pearl powder, belladonna, rouge and auricomus. But it was just because I had detected and been disgusted at such falsehoods, that I gazed at Angela Lovett as at something that I had never seen before. She looked as if she had but just stepped down, fresh made, from the hand of her Creator.

'Oh, Ange!' I exclaimed involuntarily, my admiration made patent by my voice, 'I hope that you will like me!'

'Like you—why, of course she will! what should she do else?' replied her father, answering for her. 'We must hear no more of likes and dislikes after to-day, Hilda! Here are my three daughters, all ready to attend me at my *goûter*, and I mean to make no distinction between them henceforward. So now, my little maid, kiss your sister Hilda, and let us see if Madame has given us anything that my poor old teeth can manage to crack for luncheon.'

The old gentleman's kindness made me feel so completely at home, that when Ange blushingly advanced to salute me, I opened my arms and pressed the girl to my heart as if she had indeed been my younger sister. I was not surprised, as we gathered round the table, to see that Tessie had slipped out of the room and returned with a basin of hot soup, which she placed before her father, whilst Ange silently rose and produced a small tin of rusks for him to eat with it. It was but right that the old man, whose digestion was probably impaired, should fare more daintily than his young daughters, who could eat anything.

I resolved that, before the morrow came, I would ask Tessie to let me share in the labour of waiting on him and attending to his wants.

He was good enough to call me his daughter, and I would not take the name unless I were allowed to fulfil the service. So we girls eat rye bread and cheese and munched apples, whilst Mr. Lovett sipped his soup and sherry, and talked to us of the days before we were born, when he had been hand-in-glove with some of the highest and most celebrated names in England, until I wondered why he should have left a country which was reeking with patronage and interest for him, to bury himself abroad, even though it were as the tutor of a German prince. I could not venture, however, to put the question, although I did ask him if he had not greatly missed the associates of whom he spoke on first leaving them.

'Yes, my dear Hilda, you are right. I certainly did so, but my motto through life has been, *Fais ce que dois, advienne que pourra.* It was duty that called me to this country; a hard and difficult duty it is true, but one which I could not have neglected without sacrificing what was dearer to me than pleasure —my sense of right!'

And Mr. Lovett struck his broad chest with an energy that raised him very considerably in my estimation. There is something so ennobling in the sight of a man who is strong enough to conquer inclination in the cause of his religion. His girls regarded the sentiment he had expressed with the same admiration that I did. I could see Ange's blue eyes beaming upon him from the opposite side of the table, whilst Tessie's looked tenderer than before. It was beautiful to see their devotion to their father. How glad I was to find myself in a family who respected and loved each other, and were, moreover, so perfectly united.

On rising from the table, the girls asked me if I would accompany them in a walk, but the fatigue I had encountered since the day before was beginning to make itself palpably felt, and I decided to spend the afternoon in my own room, putting my wardrobe in order. Tessie offered to assist me, but I declined her services. After so much novelty and excitement, the idea of a few hours' rest and solitude was grateful to me. But when I got alone I found I was too tired even to think. I turned out the contents of my boxes into the wooden press that waited for them, and then I flung myself down upon the inviting-looking little bed and fell fast asleep.

CHAPTER VI.

TURKEY AND TRUFFLES.

I MUST have slept for several hours, when I was awakened by the sound of a shrill voice that reached me from the courtyard below. For my room was at the back of the house, and looked out on a little paved court that lay on the other side of the narrow garden, and led through a cow-shed into the main street again. So primitive was the mode of architecture and the idea of comfort in the town of St. Pucelle.

'*Tiens!*' the shrill voice was exclaiming when my ears were suddenly made cognisant of its existence; 'you are a fool—a pig, a *maladroit*, to fancy any such thing! She will cost twice the money to keep that one of our girls do. Can we feed her on nettle soup and dandelion salad? Will she eat rye bread every day, and be content with crust *potage* for her dinner? And her presence here will make the town furious. We shall be beset by them; they will say you have no right to increase your family; and if you tell them the reason why, they will answer, "Then give us justice," and you will look like a fool—as you are!'

'But, my dear good Marmoret,' replied a soft voice, which sounded wonderfully like that of my guardian, though I could not believe that it was he, you are mistaken; I shall tell them nothing.'

'And you think I have four hands to work with, perhaps, and four feet on which to run up and down these stairs from morning till night, that you bring me another person to cook for and clean after. Bah! but it is you that will find yourself mistaken! If justice is to be done to anyone it begins with me, Marie Marmoret, who has slaved and toiled for the last twenty-two years without so much as a "thank you" for it.'

'Is that quite true?' demanded the same soft voice. 'But you are not yourself to-day, my good Marmoret; let us leave the discussion of these domestic matters until to-morrow.'

'*Not myself!*' echoed Madame, sharply; 'it is false. I am not myself when I cringe and smile and speak softly, and pretend to believe that which I know to be a lie; but I am telling you my true mind now, and you can make what you please of it. I am getting tired—that is the truth—tired and sick of it all; and I know not why I should hold my tongue more than others.'

'Well, well! I am about to see Dumont and Chrétien to-morrow, and they will believe what I say to them. if you do not.'

'And much good your seeing them will do them—poor fools! They'd better by far come to me. I could give them a piece of advice worth two of yours.'

'Now, my dear good Marmoret,' said the other voice, 'I must entreat you to be reasonable. I can manage my own affairs perfectly well, and need no assistance. You must oblige me by not interfering.'

'Bah! I have been "reasonable," as you call it, too long. If Dumont and Chrétien are to see you, I do so first. Have I not the prior claim? Answer me that!'

'Certainly you have, and I always acknowledge it. But be patient, and your reward will come.'

'I should like to see it,' grumbled Madame Marmoret, as she bustled into the house again.

Now the whole of this conversation, being carried on in voluble French, was not patent to my understanding; but I could catch a word here and there, and it made me uneasy.

Madame Marmoret was evidently very angry, and her anger was chiefly directed against me. I was sure that the first part of her conversation alluded to my arrival at St. Pucelle, and her disgust at the prospect of having more work to do in consequence. It was annoying to think I had been the cause of a disturbance so soon; but Madame Marmoret had judged me too hastily, and I had no doubt that when she knew more of me she would alter her opinion. I should never dream of entering a household with only one servant, without taking my share of its duties. She thought, doubtless, that I was a fine English lady, accustomed to be waited on for everything, and unwilling to raise a hand to help myself. She would soon find out her mistake. I could dust and sweep and make beds perhaps as well as she could, and I had fully intended to join Tessie and Ange in their domestic avocations the very next morning.

But what puzzled me was to guess to whom Madame could possibly have been confiding her grievances. At first I had thought the voice was like that of Mr. Lovett, but when I heard the familiar way in which she addressed her companion, I knew at once that it could not be her master with whom she had been talking. And I was further convinced of the justice of my conclusion when a tap at my door was followed by the entrance of Ange to tell me that dinner would be ready in a few minutes.

'We have been for such a long walk, Tessie and I,' she said, as she took off her broad-brimmed hat and fanned her heated face with it; 'right up the hill and as far as the forest. It was delightful when we got there! You would have enjoyed it, Hilda! The trees are so big and beautiful, and under them it is as cool and shady as a church. And you and papa have been sleeping all the afternoon away. Lazy people!'

'Has your papa been asleep also?'

'Yes. We found him fast asleep in the big straw chair. I hid behind it, and tickled his nose with a branch of flowering lime until he woke. It was such fun to see his dear old head bobbing round to find out who it was. Most people would have been cross, you know, but papa is never cross about anything.'

'Not with *you*, I expect,' I said, smiling.

'Nor with anybody, unless they have done something very bad indeed. Papa is an angel; you will know that when you have stayed here a little while. He is a great deal too good for this world.'

'They say the best praise a man can have is that of his own household.'

'Then papa deserves the very best, for everyone loves him—in the house and out of it—they couldn't help it. He is so good and holy. I should have no fear at all about getting into heaven if I were only sure I might keep hold of his skirts.'

'My dear, you shouldn't say that of any man.'

'I must say it of papa. I often think he is only half a man. He is so much more like some of those dear old saints whose lives Monsieur Morteville has lent me to read, and who were too holy to live with sinners upon earth. You will say the same in a few days, Hilda. But now it is dinner-time, and we must go down, or we shall get a scolding.'

'Few gentlemen like being kept waiting for their dinner,' I observed.

'Oh, I didn't mean from papa; he never scolds. It is Madame who will be so angry if we are late. And as likely as not she will carry off the dishes again, and leave us without any dinner at all,' cried Ange, laughing, as she disappeared.

I did not consider it a laughing matter, and so I quickly arranged my toilet and hurried after her.

The meal was laid in the front room, I found, this time—the *salle*, as they familiarly termed it—and the family were already assembled there.

Mr. Lovett sat at the head of the table, looking like a veritable patriarch, with his table-napkin pinned to his breast, after the foreign fashion ; the girls were on either side of him, and I found I was expected to fill the seat of honour at the bottom.

'As the eldest, my dear—as the eldest,' he averred. 'It is your proper place.'

Madame now appeared with a large covered dish, which she put before her master, and the contents of which, on being disclosed, proved to be a turkey stuffed with truffles. I felt quite hungry at the sight. My *goûter* had been sparse, and the roast turkey smelt delicious. I had no hesitation in answering in the affirmative when I was asked if I would take some of it.

I thought Madame Marmoret seemed to be muttering very much to herself when she held my plate to her master, and as she returned it to me, her words were audible enough.

'Extravagance—ruin !' she let off close to my ears, like so many pistol-shots of anger.

I saw Ange and Tessie colour and look at me and then at their father, and Mr. Lovett himself seemed to think it was time to put an end to such exhibitions of folly.

'*Tais-toi !*' he said quite sharply to the woman, and then, appearing to regret his harshness, he added : 'We know what we are about, my friend. Suppose you help me to some potatoes.'

Tessie and Ange made a simultaneous grab at the potato-dish, and, under cover of their alacrity to help their father, Madame grumbled herself out of the room.

When the confusion which followed this episode had somewhat subsided, I looked round the table and saw that neither of the girls had taken any turkey. I suppose their father had offered it to them, but they had not accepted it. Tessie was eating some slices of spiced sausage and bread, and Ange had cut up an entire cucumber as her share of dinner.

'Do you not eat meat?' I inquired, without thinking.

To the thoroughbred Briton, there appears something so extraordinary in anyone dining on vegetables and bread.

'No,' replied Ange, with a pretty blush, 'we do not care for it. In this country you see few people eat it, and, for my part, I could live upon cucumbers all the year round.'

Mr. Lovett was evidently not one of the 'few.' He consumed his turkey and truffles with the air of a real connoisseur, returning to it until he had nearly caused the whole of the breast to disappear, and washing it down with copious draughts of champagne, a bottle of which stood at his elbow. He asked me to take a glass, but I declined. I had never been used to wine, and preferred drinking water, as I saw the girls do. If Mr. Lovett's daughters did not care for meat, it was not because they meant to make up the deficiency by pudding, for no second course followed the turkey. Some Gruyère cheese and biscuits were put upon the table for their father, but the flavour was too strong to suit anybody but himself. Tessie picked some ripe figs and grapes from the walls of the house and offered them to me in her sweet shy way, and we sat together on the sill of the window that looked out upon the street, eating our fruit and watching Ange perched upon her father's knee, tying up the silver curls that hung over his brow with little bits of blue ribbon, as she was accustomed to do with her poodle's top-knot.

It was a charming sight to see them together—the handsome old man with his look of proud contentment, and the beautiful girl who was playing with him ; both so like and yet so unlike each other ; she in her extreme youth and innocence, and he with the weight perhaps of five-and-sixty winters on his brow. Yet, when at last her gentle touch had sent him off to sleep in his chair, he almost seemed the younger of the two, as he lay back, peacefully slumbering, with scarcely a wrinkle on his fair smooth skin, and the little witch's blue ribbons fluttering in his silver hair.

Meanwhile Ange joined Tessie and myself in the window-sill, and there we sat whispering to each other of all the thousand and one foolish things that enter young women's brains.

'And are you the only English in St. Pucelle ?' I asked, after we had finished discussing the place.

'Oh, Tessie ! only hear what Hilda is saying !' exclaimed Ange. 'What would Miss Sophia Markham do if she were to hear her ? She would have a fit of hysterics, at the very least.'

'Sophia Markham ! That sounds dreadfully English,' I observed.

'And Miss Markham considers herself essentially French,' replied Tessie, laughing. 'She is constantly putting us right on subjects with which we have been familiar from our birth, and on more than one occasion she has been kind enough to correct our accent for us.'

'What an unpleasant person ! Does she live here ?'

'No ; it is difficult to say where she lives——'

'I can tell you,' interrupted Ange—'with whoever will take her in.'

'Or let themselves be taken in,' continued her sister. 'Miss Markham is ubiquitous. he has no settled home, but we seem to meet her everywhere. This summer she is staying here with a family of the name of Carolus, from Brussels.'

'And, poor things, how sick they are of her! I am sure I pity them, having to listen to her silly chatter all day.'

'Well, Ange, it strikes me that Mrs. Carolus and Miss Markham get on very well together. They are inseparable companions, and have always some mutual acquaintance to abuse. This Miss Markham is really clever, Hilda; she can do anything in needle-work, and is very talkative and pleasant——'

'When there are gentlemen present,' interposed Ange.

'Oh, Ange! that is spiteful of you, though I must allow she is more pleasant with them than with her own sex.'

'Is she a young woman?' I asked.

'Oh no! I should think she must be forty or more, but she always talks as if she were very young indeed, and she calls me and Ange "mere children."'

'I know the sort of woman you mean, exactly. We had one of them at Norwood, who made herself pre-eminently ridiculous. They can never believe they are too old for love or admiration, and they generally dress so as to make themselves the laughing-stocks of society.'

'Oh! that is true, Hilda. Miss Markham borrowed a pelerine from Ange last week, and has come out in one exactly like it.'

'Is it not strange,' said Ange, musingly, 'that Madame, who in general dislikes strangers so much, should have taken such a fancy to Sophia Markham? She says she is "*une dame très aimable*," that she has "*l'air noble*," and would well adorn a throne! What can Madame see in her to say all that?'

'I am sure I cannot tell, Ange. Hilda will see her for herself, and then she can judge. But Miss Markham does not comprise the whole English population of St. Pucelle. There are, I should think, at present about a dozen families of visitors here, beside several single men for shooting.'

'Is there shooting about here, then?'

'Oh yes, in the forest of Piron—wild boars and rabbits, and hares and wolves——'

'*Wolves!* Tessie! Are you in earnest? You make me shiver.'

'Indeed there are! And M. Condé keeps one in a cage, which we will show you. And there is excellent trout-fishing here also, Hilda.'

The mention of sport had recalled my young travelling companion to my mind, and I suddenly exclaimed:

'By the way, I met some one on my journey from England, who told me that he knew you both: some one who met you at Rille, when you went to be confirmed there.

Notwithstanding the fast-falling dusk, I saw the crimson mount to the cheek of Ange.

'Who can it be?' said Tessie. 'Was it Mr. Henderson, a very old gentleman?'

'No; this gentleman was quite young.'

'Not Mr.——' began Ange, and there she stopped short, and would say no more.

'Well, I won't keep you in suspense any longer. It was a Master Frederick Stephenson who is at school at Mr. Felton's, and was greatly interested at hearing I was coming to live at St. Pucelle. He seems a very nice boy. He was so kind and polite to me about my luggage and train-ticket.'

'Oh! is that all?' said Ange, disappointedly.

'Ange thought it was a duke at the very least, coming back again to propose for her,' said her sister.

'I didn't,' pouted the little maid; 'but we know such heaps of school-boys. It is nothing new to hear they come backwards and forwards. I do not remember Master Stephenson, but Mr. Felton is a great friend of papa's, and we stayed at his house whilst we were in Rille.'

'*Bonjour, mesdemoiselles,*' said a courteous voice at the open door, and we started to see a gentleman enter the *salle.*

'Monsieur le Baron !' exclaimed Tessie and Ange in a breath, as they rose to their feet, and having saluted the new-comer, introduced him to me as the Baron de Nesselrode.

'Papa ! papa ! here is Monsieur le Baron !' cried Ange, as she pulled the blue top-knots out of her father's curls and wakened him with a kiss on either cheek.

Mr. Lovett appeared delighted to welcome his friend, and they were soon engaged in active conversation.

'Such an unfortunate young man,' whispered Tessie to me, under cover of the gentlemen's voices. 'He belongs to one of the highest families in France, but he got so dreadfully into debt that his creditors have confiscated all his fortune, and only leave him a wretched little estate in St. Pucelle to live upon. Is it not melancholy? The poor Baron always looks so sad and dull to me. He has nothing to do but to shoot and visit his neighbours, and during the winter season we are almost the only people left here. Papa is very fond of him. He pities him so much, and thinks he has been so hardly used for a little wildness.'

'And papa's daughter seems to follow his example,' I said, smiling.

'Oh ! no, *indeed!*' remonstrated Tessie, earnestly; 'but it *is* sad to be left to live alone so young—don't you think so? He is not thirty yet.'

Ange, entering at that moment with a lamp, showed me that Armand de Nesselrode was not only young, but very good-looking, which made me still further inclined to doubt whether fair-haired Tessie had not mistaken her feelings of compassion for him. He had an air of melancholy also that, combined with his dark languid eyes and the story I had heard, made him doubtless a very interesting object. He did not appear, however, to have paid his visit for the sake of seeing the Miss Lovetts, for, after the first ordinary greetings that had passed between them, he confined his attention entirely to their father, with whom he seemed to be on terms of the greatest intimacy. Cigars were produced and lighted, which was apparently the signal for the weaker sex to retire, as Tessie immediately asked me if I would go into the next room with them and have some music. Music I had little inclination for, but the wisdom of withdrawal I saw at once.

'Papa always likes to be left alone with the Baron,' said Tessie, as we entered the smaller apartment, 'they have so much to talk about together.'

The girls asked me to sing, but I begged them to excuse me. I possessed a good voice, and the use of it had formed one of my favourite occupations. I had been accustomed to sing at all sorts of places: in church choirs, for charitable concerts, at evening parties; and *she* had always been so proud to accompany me to the scenes of my small triumphs, and to double the praises I earned. Now I felt as if I should never sing again.

My voice, except for the common purposes of speech, would be as silent as hers from whom I had inherited it. I have learned since that this is the commonest feeling attendant upon sorrow. But grief was new to me then, and I believed myself to be thoroughly in earnest. Presently Ange sat down to the tinkling old instrument, whose notes were a misery to listen to, and began to sing—in low tones at first, but louder as she gained confidence—a French *chansonnette*. The little maid had not much volume of voice; I could have extinguished it with mine in a couple of bars: but what she possessed was so sweetly fresh and true, that it was a real pleasure to hear her. I sat at the window gazing up into the dark blue sky, now besprinkled with stars, and could have fancied I was listening to a child-angel singing—that is, if they ever sing *chansonnettes*. By-and-by she passed into a Latin hymn—one of those half-solemn, half-joyous chants that are so much in use in the Catholic churches, and then indeed I could look up to heaven through my tears and wonder if *she* were listening too. Did she know of the sudden change that had taken place in my life, or were all my doings, my thoughts, my joys and my sorrows, to be matters of indifference to her thenceforward; to her who had ever been so ready to sympathise with me, even if I had a finger-ache? Under the influence of this thought and the music, my tears fell faster, and, unwilling that the girls should perceive my emotion, I rose, with the intention of going to my own room for a few minutes until I should have recovered myself. But the geography of the house was as yet unfamiliar to me, and in the dusk I made a mistake, and turned the handle of the door that led into the *salle* instead of that which would have taken me to the kitchen.

I closed it again at once, but not before I had seen what was going on inside. The Baron and Mr. Lovett were seated close together at the table, playing cards by the light of a shaded lamp. There was not much harm in the circumstance, perhaps, but I had been brought up with rather strict ideas with regard to the clergy, and it offended my ideas of propriety. Yet, after all, what was there in a game of cards? I asked myself, as soon as I was alone. It was not likely that Mr. Lovett would play for anything but the pleasure of defeating his antagonist. And in a place like St. Pucelle, where there was no amusement to be had but such as one might devise for one's self, it seemed hard that even a clergyman should be deprived of any innocent diversion. So I put the game of cards to one side, under the general decision that I must not judge the customs of one country by those of another.

CHAPTER VII.

THE FAIR SOPHIA.

HAD I waited a day or two, I should have had no occasion to ask Teresa Lovett if her family formed the English population of St. Pucelle. The news of my arrival spread like wild-fire, and before a week was over my head, I had been introduced to every individual, English or Belgian, in the place. The very first whom I had the pleasure of meeting was Miss Sophia Markham, who ran in—Miss Markham never walked—on the morning following my arrival. As soon as I entered the room I recognised her, from the description given me the night before.

She was so wonderfully infantile in dress, manner, and conversation. She was a woman of forty—of forty-five—perhaps even fifty years of age, but she was very well preserved and looked much younger. And this preservation had been accomplished, not by means of cosmetics, but by the lack of them. Miss Markham was wise in her generation. She knew that powder and paint never yet hid wrinkles effectually, and that to dye the hair a different colour from that which nature has bestowed upon it, is to violate one of the first principles of art.

But this fact must not lead one to suppose that she was not intensely vain of her personal appearance, and took any amount of trouble to maintain it. For years past she had never gone to bed without plastering her face with cold cream, in order to keep her skin soft and unwrinkled. Each grey hair, as it made its unwelcome appearance, had been sedulously rooted out, and she spent hours before the looking-glass, brushing and oiling the remainder. She had bestowed equal attention on her teeth and her complexion and her figure, and the result was, that in middle life, though she could not look a girl (as she fondly persisted in thinking that she did), Miss Sophia Markham had certainly contrived to drop at least ten years of her existence. She was a short woman, with a large head, and very small hands and feet, of which she was inordinately vain. She had fine eyes and good teeth ; a large nose and a small brain. But, after the fashion of most mortals, she was so shortsighted as to be quite unable to distinguish in what she excelled and in what she did not, and persisted in imagining that her fleshy nose was a pert *retroussé*, and her mind of a ponderous and weighty order, equal in value to that of any of her peers.

As a child she had given promise of a prettiness that had never been fulfilled. This was unfortunate, as her parents' undue admiration had taught her to believe her pretensions would be realised, and after their death she had refused to be convinced that their judgment had proved false. She had been eft alone in the world with a small income barely sufficient to procure the necessaries of life, and from an early period it had been borne in upon her mind that she must be dependent for its luxuries upon her friends. Miss Sophia knew which side her bread was buttered well enough. She found that, in order to be welcome in other people's houses and allowed to stay there as long as she chose, she must give them a *quid pro quo* for their hospitality over and above the charms of her mind and person, and the questionable merit of her talents. Some she had to fawn upon and flatter till they were full to surfeiting with praises of themselves: for others she was compelled to exercise her skill in needlework, and slave at making caps and dresses wherewith to adorn their persons and recoup them for the food she was consuming: to others, again, she acted as a foil or a blind, or in any other useful capacity that a woman past her *première jeunesse* can fill, although she would have been quite faithless and unbelieving had she been told so.

At St. Pucelle she was staying, as Tessie had told me, with a couple of the name of Carolus, who were spending a few months on the Continent. It was easy to guess why *they* had come together. Mrs. Carolus, although older than Miss Markham, was newly-married, and possessed scarcely any knowledge of French. Mr. Carolus also, who was again many years senior to his wife, was fussy, taciturn, and given, about every other day, to making sudden resolutions to return to England and his merchant's office, which Mrs. Carolus was anxious to prevent.

She found, therefore, in Miss Markham at once a companion, an interpreter, and an advocate to plead against and turn the rash intentions of her husband.

At the same time, the two ladies appeared to be of very congenial temperaments, if abusing each other behind their backs and everybody else in common might be taken in evidence of the fact.

On the first occasion of my meeting Miss Sophia Markham, she was attired in a white muslin dress striped with a tiny line of blue, that might have been put on a child of ten : a pelerine edged with lace, the pattern of which she had borrowed from Angela ; and a broad-brimmed hat, trimmed with the same material and ornamented with a bunch of red cherries and leaves, that bobbed about in the most tempting manner each time she moved. In her arms she carried a little beast of a terrier, that snapped at everyone who approached within a few yards of it, and which she spoke of and addressed as if it had been a human being.

In attempting to sketch a biography of Miss Markham as it came to my knowledge, little by little, I have made one grand omission, which is to state that, throughout her varied career, she had never lost, and evidently never would lose, the hope of being married. When she was young, nothing but a duke or a marquis could have satisfied her sense of what befitted her merits ; in riper years, a baronet or a general would not have been rejected without consideration : now, she would have sworn to love, honour, and obey anything, so long as it was in the shape of a man. From the youth of eighteen or twenty to the octogenarian, she could not be made to believe but that the whole race of man had been formed but for one purpose : to admire, follow, and fall in love with her. Yet she was by no means a specimen, at least outwardly, of what is termed 'a spiteful old maid.' All Miss Markham's speeches were placid, and her words oil and honey. Even when she intended to sting most sharply, it was done under cover of the greatest amiability and the very best intentions, and she never lost an opportunity of wounding the self-love of others by encouraging and patronising them for that which they believed they did better than anything else. But I have spent too much time on a description of Miss Markham's failings. She must come forward now and speak for herself.

When I first entered the room where she was sitting, I found her engaged in an animated conversation with the 'little maid,' on the component parts of a certain ball-dress which she had worn the month before at Paris.

'Yes! it was so pretty, dear; the prettiest dress in the room, everybody said so—all pink and white silk—the very palest pink, you know—and little rosebuds peeping out every here and there from the trimming; and one gentleman said I looked just like a little rosebud myself in the midst of my pink and white drapery! He! he! he!'

At this juncture my entrance was perceived, and an introduction gone through.

'*Marsh!*' exclaimed Miss Markham, as if she had not heard my name before; 'are you any relation to the Marshes of Northampton?'

'No! I have never heard of them.'

'They were great friends of mine—indeed, Walter Marsh wanted to marry me—he! he! he!—only I wouldn't have him. He always used to call me "the pocket Venus;" and when I refused him, his family thought he would have gone out of his mind.'

'You are so hard-hearted, Sophia! you have refused so many people,' cried Tessie, laughing; but Miss Markham did not perceive that the laugh was against herself.

'Well, one cannot marry everyone, you see, and perhaps my early experience has made me rather particular. I was engaged to Lord Vauxhall, you know, before I was sixteen. Such a handsome man, and with an income of ten thousand a year. Ah! I was very foolish in those days.'

'Why didn't you marry him?' asked Ange.

'Well, dear, I broke off the engagement myself. I had been taught to look higher by my dear father, who did not think any man in the world good enough for me. Mrs. Carolus cannot understand such a thing. She evidently married the first man who asked her—and such a man, too! If you could only see the way he mumbles his food, it is enough to make one leave the dinner-table. And they go on in the most absurd manner for people of their age. She calls him "Willy," and if he does anything she disapproves of, she says he's "a naughty boy." Did you ever hear anything like it? I have found out, from some things Mrs. Carolus has told me, that she must be past sixty herself. Why, she was at a finishing school when King William died. And as for Mr. Carolus, he must be ten or fifteen years older. He has had a wife before, and twelve children. I think he ought to have been ashamed of himself for marrying again. But as for her, poor thing! I expect it was her only chance, so you can scarcely wonder at her taking it. And I *have* heard—but mind you don't mention my name—that she was not *too* particular in her younger days, and so I dare say it was rather unexpected her receiving an offer of marriage at all. My friends the Willoughbys met some people in Norfolk this spring, who lived in the same place as Mrs. Carolus's family, and I hear they had some very queer stories to tell about her sisters and herself.'

'Isn't it a great pity,' said Tessie, quietly, 'that people should trouble themselves to take away the character of a woman who is a perfect stranger to them?'

'Oh! but she was not a perfect stranger, my dear! They knew her well—by repute, that is to say. And, indeed, from all one hears, she must have been quite notorious some twenty or thirty years ago.'

'Is it wise of you to stay with her, then?' asked Ange, innocently.

I found afterwards that the little maid was very much in the habit of putting awkward questions in the most aggravatingly innocent manner. The present one caused Miss Markham to redden up like a peony.

'As for that matter, Ange,' she retorted, 'I might go far enough, I expect, before I found anyone to stay with against whose advantage there is not to be heard some story or other. I dare say Mrs. Carolus is no worse than many of your own friends; Lucy Edgecombe for instance, who ran away with and married a man against her parents' wishes, and found out afterwards that he had a wife already in America. That was a nice little scandal, wasn't it?'

'Ah! poor Lucy!' said Ange, her bright eyes filling with tears; 'it has been a most terrible grief and misfortune for her—you know that, Miss Markham. I am sure I can never think of her without crying. She used to be such a bright merry girl when we knew her in Rille, two years ago. And it broke her poor old father's heart.'

'Oh yes! I dare say. These scandals always do break the heart of somebody or other, and generally the one who is least to blame in the matter. But that doesn't alter the fact. Why do you let Ange wear her hair so much over her eyes, Tessie? It is not *bong tong* at all. The Paris ladies all wear their hair taken off the forehead, as I do. But then you must have a high, intellectual forehead for that style to suit you.'

'Papa likes her to wear it so,' said Tessie.

'And I am not a Paris lady, and I have not a high intellectual forehead,' interposed Ange. 'So I'm much better as I am.'

'Perhaps so, my dear. Indeed your forehead is not high. Arthur Thrale was remarking only the other day that you had more of the *paysanne* than the *ancienne noblesse* air about you.'

'Yet I should like to see papa's pedigree placed by that of Arthur Thrale,' cried Tessie, indignantly. 'We have some of the best blood in England in our veins, though we are so poor. Papa has often said so, and Mrs. Carolus told us the other day that Mr. Thrale's father is a large linendraper in one of the suburbs of London.'

'Of course Mrs. Carolus will run the poor boy down, because he is so absurdly devoted to me. She has tried all she can to get him for herself, without success.'

'Oh! Sophia! what can you be thinking of?' exclaimed Tessie. 'Why, Arthur Thrale is young enough to be——'

'What?' demanded Miss Markham, sharply.

'Mrs. Carolus's grandson,' replied Tessie, saving herself by a grand *coup d'état.*

'So he may be,' said Miss Markham, drawing a long breath of relief, 'but that makes no difference to her. Her jealousy of me is proverbial. She has even said—he! he! he!—that I have tried to turn "Willy's" affections from her.'

'There goes papa,' remarked Ange, more with the intention of diverting attention from the folly of their visitor than anything else, as she pointed out Mr. Lovett walking past the window on his way to the town.

'Well, good-bye then, dears; I can't stay any longer,' exclaimed Miss Markham with sudden energy, as she jumped up and kissed the two girls. 'Adieu! Miss Marsh; I hope we shall soon meet again. Come! my sweet little Toodles,' to the terrier, who was leaping and yapping round her; 'did it want to go for a walk? Then its mammy shall take it for one, the dear little angel!' and off she tripped, with the dog at her heels, in the same direction as that taken by Mr. Lovett.

'I wonder,' said Ange, thoughtfully, as she watched her from the open window, 'why Sophia Markham always pretends to like papa so much. She is generally so bitter against old men and women. But just look at her now, Hilda. She is actually taking his arm. And oh! do see the cherries bobbing up and down in his face, I should catch one in my mouth if I were he. But do you think she is in earnest, Hilda, or is it humbug?'

'How can I tell, Ange? I have only seen the woman for an hour. But even from that short experience, I should feel very much disposed to call it "humbug." Miss Markham has not the face of a true woman, neither would I like to have her for my friend.'

'I observed that you were very silent during her visit.'

'I was listening to what she said, and judging her out of her own mouth; and I do not think your father would have cared for the style of conversation she kept up with you this morning. It was worse than idle.'

'I think papa rather likes Miss Markham than otherwise,' remarked Ange. 'He is always pleased when she spends the evening here.'

'Because she is such an abominable flatterer,' said Tessie. 'She praises up his appearance, and his preaching, and his daughters to him, till he does not know whether he is on his head or his heels. Anyone would like it.'

'Oh! Tessie! you do not suppose that papa could be influenced by a woman like that, just because she flattered him,' cried Ange, with holy horror.

'Well, no, perhaps not,' replied Tessie, dubiously, whilst I thought myself that Mr. Lovett must be the saint his little daughter made him out, and not a man, if he were proof against flattery, even from Miss Markham.

CHAPTER VIII.

MADAME FROMARD.

TESSIE had prophesied that Mrs. Carolus and Miss Markham would not call in each other's company, and so it happened. The married lady did not pay her visit till some days after her friend, and then it was performed with much greater ceremony. The two girls had gone out for a walk together towards Artois, and I had promised to follow them as soon as I had finished a long epistle which I was writing to dear Mrs. Sandilands, descriptive of my new life and the thoughts it had brought to me. I had sealed my letter and put on my black hat and cloak, when Madame Marmoret shouted at me from the kitchen staircase that Mrs. Carolus had arrived, and was waiting to see me in the *salon.* I would willingly have avoided her, but found, on inquiry, that she had asked for me by name, and Madame had confessed I was at home. So there was no alternative but to receive her, and I descended to the sitting-room with my letter in my hand. I found Mrs. Carolus robed in state, with a Parisian bonnet on and a Parisian mantle, and new lavender-coloured gloves. Her grandeur quite overcame me, and I felt very meek in my straw hat bound with crape, and my untrimmed, every-day costume.

'Miss Marsh, I believe,' she said, as she shook hands with me, and I was fain to acknowledge that she believed aright.

'I have delayed my visit to you for a few days, Miss Marsh,' Mrs. Carolus continued, 'not from any want of desire to make your acquaintance, I can assure you; but because I consider it the height of ill-breeding to rush upon a stranger the very minute of her arrival, without giving her time to turn round, as if a lady had nothing else to do, at the end of a fatiguing journey, than to make the acquaintance of a pack of people she has never seen before.'

'It is very considerate of you,' I said.

'I think it is only polite, and I have hinted the same to others; but my advice is not often taken, I find, especially by those who are most indebted to me. My husband, Mr. Carolus,' said the bride, with an attempt at a blush, 'would have had the pleasure of accompanying me to-day; but he is suffering from a little indigestion, and I forbid him to move.'

'I am sorry Mr. Carolus is ill.'

'It is not serious; but gentlemen are difficult creatures to keep in order, as perhaps you will discover for yourself some day. You know my friend Miss Markham, I think?'

'Yes; she called here the day after my arrival.'

'I guessed as much! Mr. Lovett is the great attraction here, I believe; but I cannot say I have ever seen much good result from single ladies running after gentlemen in that way—widowers or not. But this is a terrible place for flirtation, Miss Marsh! and you will have as many opportunities of pursuing it as anybody.'

'Indeed! I do not quite understand you.'

'Why, all the young men in St. Pucelle collect about Mr. Lovett. He is a general favourite with them. Have you not seen the Baron de Nesselrode here?'

'Yes; he comes almost every evening.'

'Just so. Some people think it is a pity that Mr. Lovett should encourage his young friends so much. It is not as if they came to speak of the things that a clergyman is usually supposed to talk about, you know.'

'But surely young men could never derive anything but benefit from associating with such a good man as Mr. Lovett,' I replied. 'You should hear his daughters speak of him, Mrs. Carolus. They cannot find terms high enough in which to sing their father's praises.'

'Oh yes, my dear; I have heard them speak of him. And, of course, no one could dare to say that he would do his friends any harm. But still, there's the Baron, you see. Poor fellow! he's gambled away more than two-thirds of his fortune already, and has to live on a pittance until his debts are discharged. It is a pity, is it not, that he should not have given up cards even yet? I wish dear good Mr. Lovett would remonstrate with him on the subject, and advise him better. But he is too easy with young men. I understand he was very wild himself in his early days—at least, so my Willy tells me—and that makes him disposed to be lenient, perhaps, with others.'

I felt that to this speech I had no answer to make, so I evaded it with a remark:

'With two such pretty girls in the house,' I said, 'I should have thought people would have had no difficulty in deciding the motive which made young men congregate about their father.'

'Oh no, my dear, it's not that,' replied Mrs. Carolus, hastily. 'He has not got either of them off his hands yet, you see, though the eldest must be seven-and-twenty.'

'Three-and-twenty,' I murmured in correction.

'Only three-and-twenty! Dear me! She looks very old for her age. There *was* a talk, some few months ago, of the little one being very much admired by a young fellow of the name of—let me see, what was his name? I declare I have quite forgotten it. But Sophia can tell you—Sophia can always remember a gentleman's name, whatever she forgets. However, the Lovetts met him at Rille, where their father takes them every now and then; and I suppose he paid Miss Angela some attention (for that little one really is very nice-looking), but it came to nothing after all; and it's my opinion they'll neither of them ever be married.'

'What a terrible fate!' I said, laughing.

'Ah, well, my dear Miss Marsh, you may be able to afford to laugh at the idea; but a single life *is* a terrible fate for a woman after all! And how it sours them! Just look at Sophia Markham! That girl—I call her a girl, you know, but in reality she is many years older than myself; and I might have been married fifty times over before I made up my mind to take Willy—well, to hear her speak of her own sex is shocking! She has never a good word to say for any one of them. Now, I am sure I may trust you, Miss Marsh, and you won't mention my name again, if I tell you that the way Sophia Markham has gone on under my roof has distressed me to that degree, that I can never invite her to stay with me again—never! No gentleman is safe from her attacks—young or old, rich or poor, it is all the same. She would carry my Willy off from under my very eyes if I would let her! But I drew the line there. Of course I cannot interfere with her goings-on in other directions; still, it annoys me greatly. For I am quite convinced she will never be married. Not on account of her age; though I think few people would credit she is only ten years my senior,' added Mrs. Carolus with a smirk, 'but because of her manners, which are bold and forward to a degree. But you were going out, Miss Marsh; I am afraid I am detaining you.'

'I was going to post this letter, and then to join the Miss Lovetts who have gone for a walk on the Artois road.'

'Do not let me keep you any longer, then; indeed I will walk a little way with you if you will permit me,' said Mrs. Carolus.

I did not particularly wish for the company of this lady, who appeared to me only a degree less objectionable than her friend; but as it was drawing near the post-time, and I was anxious that Mrs. Sandilands should get my letter without delay, I consented to the proposal made me.

'Do you consider that Mr. Lovett is likely to marry again, Miss Marsh?' inquired Mrs. Carolus, as we left the house together.

The question took me so completely by surprise, that I did not know what to answer.

'Indeed,' I said, 'I have been here far too short a time to be able to form any opinion on the matter.'

'I should think it very improbable myself, with those girls dependent on him, and in the state of his affairs, too; but doubtless you know quite as much about *them* as I do. Everybody in St. Pucelle is admiring you so much for coming to live with them, Miss Marsh, and says that it is an act of pure benevolence on your part.'

'I am afraid you are giving me more credit than I deserve, Mrs. Carolus. I came here on the invitation of Mr. Lovett, simply because I need change of scene, and I considered myself more than anyone else in making the decision.'

'Ah! and so did he, my dear—so did he. There is little doubt of that. But what is to become of those poor girls when he is gone? He can't last for ever, you know. He must be past seventy now?'

'I have never thought of it. It does not come within my province to do so.'

'To be sure not, and I trust it never may. Death is a sad thing! I suppose you know pretty nearly everyone in St. Pucelle by this time, Miss Marsh.'

'I think I have made acquaintance with all the ladies. A very pretty girl, a Mrs. Arthur Johnstone called upon me yesterday. She does not look much older than Ange.'

'Poor child! yes, she has very tolerable features. For my part, I like her, but one cannot quite shut one's ears to all one hears. Did the husband come with her?'

'No!'

'I thought as much! He never goes anywhere. Only too glad to keep out of sight, I should think. The Ormerods tell me he has been cashiered from the army!'

'How dreadful for his poor little wife! And she seems so cheerful too. She laughed the whole time she was with us yesterday.'

'Perhaps she doesn't know it, or doesn't care. You will meet strange characters abroad, my dear. The Continent is the general refuge for all those who are unable to live in England.'

'So I have heard,' I answered listlessly.

I was thinking of Frederick Stephenson's stories on the same subject, and it vexed me. It was not pleasant to believe one's self surrounded by a set of dishonourable vagabonds. And if it were so, I would rather have been left to find it out for myself than have been told of it by Mrs. Carolus. We had reached the high ground by this time which led to the Artois road, and I was looking about me with the admiration with which I never ceased to view the country that surrounded St. Pucelle. The grass we trod upon sent up a grateful fragrance of crushed herbs, and little tufts of flowers grew between each cleft of the rocky hill as if they had been planted there on purpose for effect.

As we strolled along, we gazed down upon the town which we had quitted, lying in the steep hollow beneath us, with its long narrow street of wooden houses and grey granite walls, peopled by women in short petticoats, bare feet, and snowy caps, with men in blue blouses and leathern aprons, with rough carts drawn by oxen, and a heterogeneous mass of children tumbling about in the stream of dirty water which the gutter conveyed rapidly to its level in the valley. On the summit of the green hill which we had to gain before descending, like the dirty water, to Artois, there stood a large wooden Calvary, which might be seen for many miles round. Rough as this representation of the most important event that ever occurred in the world's history was upon a closer inspection, its size and colouring, with the green mound on which it was erected, gave it a very solemn appearance when viewed from a distance, particularly when, as was the case on this occasion, a group of worshippers knelt at the foot of the Cross.

We instinctively dropped our voices and walked slower as we approached the Calvary, but before we had passed it, a woman and a little girl rose hastily and confronted us. They were peasants, and carried covered baskets, filled probably with butter and eggs. The woman was wiping her eyes on the corner of her rough apron, when she perceived Mrs. Carolus, and gave her a '*Bon jour*, *madame*.'

My companion returned the greeting, and we were continuing our walk when the woman suddenly ran after us and touched Mrs. Carolus on the sleeve.

'Is that the demoiselle that has come to live with Monsieur le Curé Anglais?' she demanded in her own language, as she intimated me with her forefinger.

'*Je ne comprenez pas*,' replied Mrs. Carolus.

Notwithstanding my inexperience of speaking French, I thought I could do a little better in the way of verbs than this, and ventured to answer the woman myself.

'Yes! I am the demoiselle. What do you want?'

But on hearing these few faltering words, the poor woman gave vent to such a mingled torrent of tears and explanations, that I was out of my depth again directly. She was *désolée;* she was *distraite;* she would pray that the good Lord would take her life, only that Monsieur l'Abbé would refuse her absolution if she did so.

But would mademoiselle conceive of her position? Monsieur le Curé Anglais was so beloved and so respected, '*c'est un homme si bon, si aimable, si dévoué.*' How could one go to him again for the fourteenth time in a month, and ask for his pity, his benevolence, his compassion? But then mademoiselle must consider her family. She had five children to provide for, and here was the eldest, not old enough to do more than carry the baskets to and from the Artois market. It was but little they wanted; they had been very patient, and she had been praying the *bon Dieu* for more patience, but mademoiselle must know that people cannot live without eating, though 'twas but little enough they had had inside them for the last month.'

'But what has all this got to do with me?' I said in despair.

I had tried to translate the question three times into French, but failing to do so, was obliged to have recourse to Mrs. Carolus and the English language.

'Oh! I think I can guess fast enough,' she replied, with a sarcastic laugh.

The woman, with the quickness of her race, had caught the meaning of my words and answered them.

'If mademoiselle would only speak for me,' she pleaded, 'we are so poor, and *mon mari* has been in his bed for the last twelvemonth. A few francs, mademoiselle. We do not ask for a large sum, but if we could have half, or even a quarter of it.'

'Does she want me to give her money?' I inquired in my bewilderment of Mrs. Carolus.

'I should hardly think so. There are no beggars here. What does she say?'

'She says she is so poor—they have not enough to eat, and her husband is ill.'

'Give her half a franc, then; but I should hardly think it is true. The Catholics are too well looked after to want.'

I tendered the coin to the woman, but she pushed it away impatiently.

'No! no! mademoiselle,' she said, shaking her head; 'I am not a beggar. I do not want your charity.'

'Then what *do* you want?' I asked, defying grammar and accent in my desire to make her understand.

'*Mon droit*,' she answered proudly.

'What is your name?' I said.

'I am Madame Fromard.'

'*Fromard!*' echoed Mrs. Carolus, suddenly; 'you sell eggs, don't you? *vous vendez urfs—urfs et boor?*' she repeated for Madame Fromard's benefit.

'*Oui, madame! oui! des œufs et du beurre.*'

'Oh! I know her well. You'd better come on, Miss Marsh. It is of no use stopping to talk to this woman. She will keep you till midnight if you let her.'

'What is her cause of complaint?' I said, as, having bidden Madame Fromard farewell, and left her snivelling and wiping her eyes upon her apron, we strolled on together.

Mrs. Carolus regarded me with a very curious expression.

'Haven't you found out?' she said; 'I thought you understood French.'

'So I do, after the English fashion, but when these natives begin to chatter, they run on so fast, there is no keeping pace with them. I could make out that she was very poor and wanted francs, but I suppose they would all say that, if they found anyone to listen to them.'

'You'll understand them a great deal better after you have been here a little while,' replied Mrs. Carolus, mysteriously, so mysteriously and unpleasantly, indeed, that I did not like her manner at all, and was quite glad when I perceived the figures of Tessie and Ange advancing to meet us.

'What a time you have been!' exclaimed the little maid. 'We have walked half-way to Artois and back. Monsieur Condé met us, and wanted us to go into the park and see him shoot a young bear he keeps there that has become dangerous—horrid man! as if we would; and he is coming to see you very soon, Hilda. He is anxious to take you over the grottoes. He thinks they are the only things worth seeing in the world.'

'What grottoes?'

'Why, the grottoes of St. Jean! Have you never heard of them? They are very wonderful, full of beautiful crystals and stalactites. We must make a party and go over them some day. It is no fun going alone. Have you seen them, Mrs. Carolus?'

'Oh yes! We visited them on our first arrival here, and thought them very interesting.'

It was more, however, than Mrs. Carolus appeared to think our conversation, for she declined to turn back with us again.

'Tell them all about Mère Fromard,' she called out to me before she finally disappeared.

'What about Mère Fromard?' asked Tessie.

So I told them of the peasants we had encountered kneeling at the Calvary, and the broken conversation that had subsequently ensued between us. I saw Tessie and Ange exchange glances as I proceeded with my story, and I fancied they were not pleased with it.

'I could barely catch her meaning,' I concluded, 'but I fancy she mentioned your names. I suppose you know her.'

'Oh yes! we know her well,' said Tessie.

'Is she amongst the poor that you visit?'

'There are no families here whom we visit in the way you mean. Monsieur l'Abbé looks after them too well for that. But we go if they are sick or in trouble, as we should offer our sympathy to any other friends.'

'This poor woman seemed in trouble.'

'Ange will go and see her as soon as she has time,' said Tessie. 'For the present, we cannot do her any good, so let us take this little path into the town, or we may meet her again. She is very troublesome to shake off if she once gets a hearing.'

I thought both the girls seemed graver and less sympathetic than they usually were when talking of their poorer neighbours, and I concluded that the Fromards were not amongst the most deserving in St. Pucelle.

Mr. Lovett appeared at dinner-time looking as handsome and benignant as usual, and quite full of the pleasant stroll he had had with Miss Markham, and the successful manner in which she had beguiled the time.

'She is a most amusing companion,' he said. 'Her fund of anecdotes seems inexhaustible, and she tells her stories in an irresistibly funny manner. I do not know when I have laughed so much as I did this afternoon.'

'I am glad you enjoyed yourself, papa,' remarked Tessie, quietly.

'I did, indeed! Miss Markham reminds me in a powerful degree of the late Duchess of Rochester, who was one of the wittiest women in society in Lord Amor's time. And she is well-looking for her age too—very well-looking!'

'She is better than well-looking, is Mademoiselle Markham,' said the shrill voice of Marmoret, as she placed a roast hare before her master; 'she has got money, and that's worth all the beauty in the world, in my opinion.'

'It's not a bad thing, Madame, is it?' replied Mr. Lovett; 'but how do you know the lady in question possesses any?'

'Why, by using my eyes, to be sure! Do you think I'm blind, or a fool, like some I could mention? Look at that demoiselle's dresses. Why! she wears a fresh muslin every morning, and the silk she went to church in last Sunday would have stood of itself. Of course she's got money. How do you suppose she could pay for such things else?'

'Perhaps she doesn't pay for them,' remarked my guardian, facetiously; but he had to answer for doubting the truth of Madame Marmoret's expressed opinion.

'*Doesn't pay for them!*' she echoed in a tone steeped in vinegar. 'Why should you imagine such a scandal? It is not everybody, remember, who would stoop to defraud honest people of their money, when they've worked hard to earn it.'

The woman was in such an evident rage that the two girls looked quite frightened.

'Dear Madame, do be reasonable,' pleaded Tessie.

But Mr. Lovett put it down with a higher hand.

'Come—come! let us have no nonsense of this kind,' he said. 'I like to have my dinner in peace, or I shall digest nothing that I eat; and as for you, Madame, the kitchen is your arena for display, and not the *salle à manger*.'

'And much you would get to eat, or to digest either, if I stayed there,' she exclaimed, as she flounced off to her own domains.

The girls looked annoyed, as they always did when Madame Marmoret displayed any temper, but their father laughed as if it were a very good joke.

'She will go out in the court and cool herself upon the flagstones,' he said; 'meanwhile we will discuss our dinner. Hilda, my dear, may I help you to a little of this hare?'

I had found, since the first day of my dining with them, that his daughters never partook of the same dish as he did, and I had learnt to follow their example. It is true that, considering the amount that was to be deducted from my income for my keep, I might reasonably have considered myself entitled to the best that was put upon the table; but there was a strong feeling in me against sharing in the luxuries which they were forbidden. I liked them both too well. The meals greatly varied too, both in quality and quantity. I had found that out already. Sometimes there was barely sufficient to go round the family, and that of food of the commonest or most distasteful quality; at others, we rejoiced in an influx of fish, flesh, and fowl—a regular *embarras des richesses*, and accompanied by bottles of champagne and burgundy. On such occasions the old father would be in the very best of spirits, laughing and jesting with us all, and brilliant with repartee and anecdote. At others, he would seem low and despondent, remaining silent during the dinner hour, or alluding only to his poverty and altered circumstances.

Then his girls would vie with each other to pet and caress him, reminding him of his past successes, and of what a favourite he was at the Belgian Court, until he would leave them with the determination to write to some of his friends in office and seek redress for the hardness of his position.

Yet the very next day, perhaps, we would have trout for breakfast and beef for dinner, and all would go merry as a marriage bell.

To-day the secret springs that moved the machinery of the kitchen and larder had evidently gone right, for the roast hare was crowned with red currant jelly and flanked by sauterne; but I refused all the dainties Mr. Lovett pressed upon me, and preferred to eat stewed veal, the commonest dish of the country, with Tessie and Ange instead.

'I heard an unpleasant thing to-day about some acquaintances of ours,' remarked Mr. Lovett, as he finished his second plate of hare—'a very unpleasant thing, indeed.'

'From Miss Markham, papa?' inquired Tessie, timidly.

'Yes; but not repeated with the slightest ill-nature, I can assure you. In fact, I was quite charmed with the candid and liberal manner in which the story was told me. The truth is, Miss Markham, who is quite a woman of the world, and shows a wonderful interest in you two girls, considered it quite her duty to inform me of it, and I assured her she was right.'

'Oh, papa! what is it?' cried Ange, anxiously.

'Nothing to alarm you, my little maid. It is only about the Johnstones. Miss Markham does not think Mrs. Johnstone a very desirable acquaintance for you, and neither do I.'

'What has she done, sir?' I inquired.

'Nothing herself, my dear Hilda, at least that I have heard of, but the husband appears to be a very loose character. It seems that he was cashiered from the army for gambling, and left England only to prevent himself from being arrested for debt.'

'Oh, how dishonourable that is!' I exclaimed. 'I think there is no meanness equal to that of defrauding tradesmen of their due.'

'And neither do I,' said Angela, stoutly. Tessie sat by and heard us, but she said nothing.

'Yet it is hard that her husband's dishonesty should inculpate poor Mrs. Johnstone,' I observed; 'perhaps she knows nothing of it all.'

'Perhaps not,' replied Mr. Lovett, 'but she shares his disgrace. It is the penalty of having married a man without principle. And I would not have my children's names associated with hers, after what I have heard to-day. So mind, girls, what I say. Be civil to her when you meet, but don't go to her house any more, nor invite her to come here.'

'I am *so* sorry for the Johnstones,' remarked Tessie, softly, as we sat in our own room together afterwards.

'*I* am not,' said Ange; 'I think there is nothing so horrible in this world as swindling tradesmen. Fancy, going to a lot of poor people who trust your honour, and getting clothes and provisions out of them, and then running away and leaving them to pay for you! It is so pitifully mean and ungenerous.'

'I quite agree with you, Ange,' I said; 'still, people do sometimes get into debt before they are aware of it.'

'I can't believe that,' returned the little maid; 'no one but a child or an idiot could do that. Why, if papa were to swindle or cheat people, I don't think I could ever speak to him again. It would break my heart with shame and agony. I should never be able to look anybody in the face. Would you, Tessie?'

'What did you say, dear? I was not listening.'

'Wouldn't you rather that papa were dead than a cheat and a swindler like Mr. Johnstone?'

'Oh, Ange! don't say such hard things of people.'

'Are they too hard? I didn't think they could be. Well! there's one comfort in hearing of such villany. It makes one feel so thankful that papa is not as other men are! The dear, dear, good old pappy! If he had ever done such things, I should die at once.'

CHAPTER IX.

SUNDAY.

SUNDAY at St. Pucelle was not such an uninteresting day as I had anticipated. On the first Saturday I spent there, I passed through the kitchen and detected Tessie, with a large holland apron and bib pinned over her serge dress, busily employed in making tartlets. How fair and gentle she looked—somehow after I had seen Ange I never could call Tessie pretty, although her sweet womanly face gained by the contrast with that of her lovely sister. There she stood with her sleeves rolled off her arms, and a smile dimpling every feature as I confronted her.

'Making good things for to-morrow's dinner?' I asked.

'Oh no! though I'll keep some for you, Hilda, if you particularly wish it. These are for papa during the service.'

'*For papa during the service!*' I could not help re-echoing her words. There seemed something so intensely ludicrous in the idea of a minister of the Church consuming jam tarts between the Litany and the Communion.

'Yes; he requires something to keep him up, you know. It is very fatiguing for an old man to read and preach for two hours at a time, so we always prepare him a little *goûter* in the vestry.'

'Has Mr. Lovett no help, then?'

'A layman occasionally reads the lessons for him. Young Mr. Thrale has promised to do so to-morrow, but otherwise he has all the work on his own hands.'

'And three services a day, I suppose?'

'Oh no! only one in the morning. There are not enough Protestants to make it worth while. No one would come a second time. But I hope you will like our service, Hilda. It is nothing very grand, of course, but Ange and I try to make the singing as nice as we can, and nothing could exceed papa's preaching. It is beautiful!'

When I had become acquainted with the Protestant service held in the schoolroom vacated by the little Romanists of St. Pucelle, I agreed with Tessie, that, considering all the disadvantages it laboured under, it was very nice, and it owed much of its success to the labours of herself and Ange. From the moment that Sunday dawned, these two girls were very important people indeed. They appeared to me to combine the offices of sacristan, clerk, organist and choir all in one. As soon as their breakfast was completed they ran over to the schoolroom to make sure that it was properly aired, dusted and swept: to arrange the Communion-table, which was stowed away in a cupboard during the week: to see that the benches were properly placed, the tiny harmonium pulled into position, and the lessons and hymns for the day looked out ready for their father and themselves. They had the arrangements for all the music and chanting in their own hands, and merely placed a list of the hymns to be sung on the Communion-table; which always bore a vase of flowers set there by Ange.

Of course they had secured me to take part in the singing, which I was willing enough to do. To sing praise to God and to sing songs to the piano were two different things. I felt I came nearer *her* whilst engaged in the former practice, and that if my dull ears could only be opened, I might be able to distinguish her own sweet voice mingling with mine.

So at a few minutes before eleven, we three girls were established behind the harmonium; Tessie in front of it as accompanist, and Ange and I on either side, to take soprano and alto as lustily as we could, and induce the congregation to chime in.

It was difficult to divest one's mind of the idea that we were only in a schoolroom, nor to help being amused by the remarks Ange made on the people as they filed in, one after another. There were the poor condemned Johnstones, looking handsomer and more stylish than anybody there: there were, of necessity, the giddy Sophia Markham, with young Thrale in close attendance: Mr. and Mrs. Carolus, dressed in their newest and best. Colonel Berwick, with his interminable family of girls and boys —a gentleman of such ultra-Protestant views that he would not permit his children to pass the Catholic church in their daily walks, for fear the Abbé Morteville should rush out and baptise them all in the middle of the road: Mrs. Dart, a handsome widow, of whose antecedents no one could find out anything; and a dozen or more stray men and women whose names I had been told, but who were not particularly intimate with the Lovetts. These naturally did not constitute the resident part of the population of St. Pucelle, who were all Catholics.

They were the English visitors only, who filled the two little primitive hotels of the town—the Hôtel de la Cloche and the Hôtel de l'Étoile—for three to six months in the year. They had scarcely settled down in their seats—Miss Markham having turned round first and nodded to us all in a manner which I thought most irreverent in a place of worship—when Mr. Lovett entered and ascended the temporary pulpit that was dragged out of the cupboard with the Communion-table every Sunday morning. As I saw the old man in his surplice and bands, I was ready to agree with all the admiration his daughters bestowed upon him; he looked so handsome, so venerable and so much like a saint, that he was what the nurses term 'a perfect picture.'

As he knelt in prayer, with his finely-shaped hands clasped together, his beautiful blue eyes upraised to heaven, and his silver curls crowning a brow which must have befitted an Antinous in earlier days, he should have been painted for a prophet or an apostle, pleading with the Almighty for mercy on sins which he knew only through the weakness of others. And if I thought my guardian's personal appearance striking on that occasion, I was still more delighted with his delivery. His elocution was remarkable. Each word fell from his lips with musical distinctness, and it was evident that the art had formed an important part of his studies. He read the lessons—young Thrale being too nervous to do so when it came to the point—as I had never heard them read before. Without any theatrical display, he gave the New Testament history for the day, as a history, not divided into so many monotonous verses badly punctuated, but strongly and energetically delivered, with an expression that must have riveted the attention of everyone who was listening to him.

I felt at once that there stood before me a man of no common parts or learning, a man who should have been (as his daughter had fondly said) set in a high place to give light to the world. Nor was I disappointed by the sermon that followed the prayers. It was stirring—terse—to the point, and delivered with energy. The blue eyes flashed with anger or glowed with feeling as he denounced sin or invited to pardon, and when in a few words he described the horrors that awaited the impenitent, a thrill of terror ran through his congregation.

I felt it keenly, and glanced towards my companions to see what effect it had upon them. Tessie was looking like an ordinary mortal, quietly interested; but Ange had her whole attention riveted on her father's words and face. Her eyes were filled with tears, her cheeks were glowing, her whole expression was one of adoring admiration. When Mr. Lovett had finished his sermon, which was so superabundantly superior to anything I had ever heard from a pulpit before, that I was quite surprised the congregation did not applaud him, she waked up from her reverie with a start and a long-drawn sigh, and had only time to whisper hurriedly to me, 'Isn't he perfect?' before the harmonium struck up again, and we rose to sing the parting hymn.

The service, simply as it was conducted, had had such a solemn effect upon me, that I was disgusted to see Miss Sophia Markham, before she left the schoolroom, approach the place where we were sitting, and to hear her ask Ange in a loud whisper if we would all go over to their hotel in the afternoon and have tea with them.

'Arthur Thrale's friend—the sporting man—my great admirer (you know who I mean), has promised to come over from Rille, if possible, and we can all go for a walk over the hills together. *You* can come, can't you, if the others won't?'

I saw the crimson colour rush like a flood over Ange's lovely face, but she shook her head determinately in answer to the invitation.

'We make a rule of never going out on Sundays, Miss Markham.'

'Oh, well! just as you like, you know; but I thought it would give you pleasure. What are you going to do to-morrow?'

'Papa will be waiting for us in the vestry, Ange,' whispered Tessie, who had put away the chant-books, and did not appear to like this sort of conversation going on in church any more than I did.

Ange took the hint, and, rising without further ceremony, we walked up to the little room where Mr. Lovett robed and disrobed. But here I was rather startled by coming upon the reverend gentleman seated in his surplice before a small table, on which, spread on an old newspaper, were some sandwiches, a flask of sherry, and the tartlets Tessie had made the day before. Yet she did not seem to see anything in the sight incongruous with the words we had just heard fall from those lips, now besmeared with *compôte de fraises*.

'Are they good, papa?' she inquired affectionately.

'Very good, my dear!' he replied, with his mouth full; 'but your second hymn was so short, I had no time to eat them before. You must look out a longer one for next Sunday! You forget the work I have to do whilst you are singing a couple of verses. Four is the very least I can accomplish it under.'

'He *shall* have four—the dear old dad!' exclaimed Ange, as she kissed the top of his head; 'or six if he likes it better. Oh, papa! you were divine to-day. You made me cry so! How I wish we were all dead and safe in heaven together!'

'Tut! tut! you silly little mouse!' said her father, as he patted her rose-leaf cheek; 'you mustn't talk about being dead and buried just yet! You'll have to put me under ground first, you know.'

'Oh, papa! papa! *don't!*' she cried, in a voice of real pain.

'Well, then, trot home and see after the dinner being got ready in time. We are obliged to dine early to-day, my dear Hilda, in consideration of the proceedings of our domestic tyrant Madame Marmoret, who insists upon attending three services at her own church every Sunday, and disregarding everything she hears there on the remaining six days of the week.'

'A very common practice, Mr. Lovett, with people much better instructed than Madame Marmoret.'

'Very true, my dear! I wonder how many of my congregation of to-day will even remember, let alone practise, the precepts I have just preached to them. But come, little people, clear out of my vestry, for I want to resume my usual garb.'

I thought Ange was uncommonly thoughtful that afternoon, and I could not help associating her mood with the information Mrs. Carolus had given me about the young man at Rille who had paid her so much attention which had come to nothing.

Was it possible, I thought, as I watched her sitting on the ground with her hands folded idly on her lap, and her sunny head laid against her father's knee, that her young heart could have suffered a disappointment, anything akin, in magnitude or bitterness, to that which had been experienced by my own? I could not believe it. The infidelity of Cave Charteris, whether it had been brought on by my credulous folly or his thoughtlessness, had left a mark upon me which I knew that nothing in this world could ever obliterate. I was not so young nor so blind as to imagine that I should never be happy again. I knew that men and women had sustained and conquered greater griefs and more crushing shames than mine. But I no more believe that I should ever forget the awful pain my first disappointment had caused me, than that I should replace the dear friend and mother whose death had left a vacancy in my bruised heart that no mortal could fill again.

Ange seemed to me too young to have suffered in proportion with myself; not too young in years, but in spirit. How I envied the youthful gaiety with which she enjoyed her walks and talks, and simple occupations, the fresh laughter that burst from her, with her will or against it, at anything that touched her sense of ridicule; and the innocent mischief which made her love to tease her father or her sister, or even Madame, until she was compelled to win their pardon by her kisses.

No! Ange could never have passed through the same valley of suffering as I had! Its shadows would have frightened her light-heartedness to death. Yet she was certainly very grave that afternoon, and very silent: but when I taxed her with it, she replied that she was always tired on Sundays, and wanted rest after the exertion of singing, or, as she expressed it, of 'bawling at the top of her voice, for two hours, without stopping.' After which I was surprised, when tea was over, to see her come down into the sitting-room, robed for walking

'Are you going out again, Ange?'

'Yes, to evening church.'

'I thought there was only one service here.'

'Papa has only one; but Monsieur l'Abbé has the regular number at his church. I always go there in the evening, the service is so beautiful. Will you come with me?'

'I shall be delighted.'

It was nothing extraordinary in *me* to consent to attend a Catholic service, because I was a very broad and muscular Christian indeed, bound, by my own conscience, to no creed nor Church whatever, but ready to join in any prayers that satisfied my ideas of what religious worship should be, and to believe that the path that took him readiest to God was the right path for each man to walk in, irrespective of the pilot who led the way. But then I was not a minister of the Established Church of England, who had taken a very solemn oath to uphold her doctrines and protect her interests in every possible manner, and it seemed very strange to me that Mr. Lovett should like it to be known, in a little town like St. Pucelle, that his daughters attended the services of a Church whose doctrines were so diametrically opposed to those of his own.

'Does your papa approve of your going to vespers at St. Marie?' I said to Ange, as we walked there together.

'Oh, Hilda! Do you suppose I should do so without his approval? Why, of course he does. And the Abbé Morteville is one of papa's very best and most intimate friends.'

'That may be. I see no reason whatever why a difference of religious opinion should have any effect upon the friendship of men. Still, I should have thought, as Mr. Lovett is a Protestant minister, that he would have been almost afraid to let you and Tessie attend the Catholic services.'

'Why?' she asked quickly.

'For various reasons; the chief being, that you might be converted to Catholicism yourselves.'

'I don't think papa would object to it if we were! You don't half know yet how good and generous and liberal-minded he is, Hilda. If he thought Tessie and I were fully persuaded that we should not be happy unless we became Catholics, he would never oppose our wishes. But he need have no fear; at all events on my account. I shall never leave the English Church so long as he is in it.'

I admired the beautiful childlike faith which she had in her father, and in everything which he believed to be right, but I could not join in it. To me it seemed the most culpable negligence to allow a girl with so unformed a mind as that of Ange to attend regularly the offices of a Church to which she did not belong. However, it was no concern of mine, and I was silent.

As we approached the porch of St. Marie, we met the Baron de Nesselrode.

'How do you do, Monsieur le Baron?' exclaimed Ange. 'We are going to attend vespers this evening. Will you come with us?'

Armand de Nesselrode laughed uneasily.

'I am afraid you must excuse me,' he replied; 'it is a very long time since I have seen the inside of a church, Mademoiselle Ange.'

'Is that so? What a sad confession! What would Monsieur l'Abbé say were he to hear it?'

'The truth, probably—that I am a lost sheep not worth the looking after.'

'Indeed he would not. I can answer for that. Monsieur l'Abbé is far too good to say such a thing to anyone.'

'But he has given me up, all the same, and he is wise to do so. He has too much occupation for his time to waste it upon a *vaurien* like myself. No one remembers me, Mademoiselle Ange. I am an outcast, and alone.'

Alone! The word struck painfully upon my ear. I had so often used it in reference to my own condition. And although Armand de Nesselrode laughed with apparent carelessness as he said it, I felt sure that he was suffering bitterly the while. I wished, at that moment, that I could speak French as fluently as Ange did—that I might assure him that I could sympathise in his sense of solitude. But a foolish timidity bound my tongue. The young Baron spoke with a pure Parisian accent, and I was ashamed to air my boarding-school French before him. Yet, as he raised his hat to me in parting, I ventured to say, in a very low voice:

'Monsieur, when we pray to-night, we will not forget you.'

A gleam of pleasure and sudden interest lit up the dark eyes which he fixed upon me.

'I thank you—I thank you very much, mademoiselle,' he replied fervently, as we passed into the church.

When we returned home that evening, we went at once into the little sitting-room, where Tessie was sitting by herself, reading.

'Where is papa, Tessie?'

'He has gone over to the Hôtel de la Cloche to see Miss Markham. She sent up a note by Arthur Thrale to ask him to do so. I suppose the visitor they expected from Rille has arrived, and requires a little more amusement than can be extracted from poor old Mr. Carolus.'

Again that vivid burning blush on Ange's cheek, but she did not make any remark upon her sister's news. She only threw her hat and cape upon a chair, and, going up to the piano, sat down and commenced to play a hymn. It was a familiar one to all of us.

Tessie left her book and took a seat beside me, and put her arm round my waist, and we sang the words together. Amidst the noise which we made with our own voices, I could not distinguish if the little maid joined us or no. We had not finished the hymn, however, when the door from the *salle* softly opened, and the tall figure of the Baron de Nesselrode stood upon the threshold. We would have stopped at once, but he motioned us to proceed, and stood there, with the door in his hand, until the hymn was concluded. Then he closed it behind him, and advanced into our midst.

'Monsieur Lovett, I find, is not at home, so I ventured to come a little farther than the *salle*,' he said to Tessie. 'Will you continue your singing, Mademoiselle Ange? It is such a treat to me to listen to music. I never hear any now.'

'You are fond of it, then, Monsieur le Baron?'

'Passionately, mademoiselle. At one time I thought I could never live without it. But one is forced to learn hard lessons in this world. There is a fine organ up at my old château, but it has not been opened for years; and I conclude that, like its owner, it is ruined.'

'What a pity! You should have it examined. Why not get the opinion of the organist of St. Marie upon it?'

'I would rather have the opinion of you demoiselles, if you would graciously accord it to me. Do you think Monsieur votre père would so far honour me as to bring you all up to the château some day, that you may see and pronounce on the merits of my poor old organ for yourselves?'

'We will ask papa, Monsieur le Baron, but I do not think he will have any objection.'

'Objection?' cried Ange, wheeling round on her music-stool, 'I should think not. I won't let him have an objection. Tessie and I have so often longed to see your château, Monsieur le Baron—the dear old romantic tumbled-down place. I have peeped over the wall dozens of times, and picked all the roses within my reach; but of course I dared not venture within the gates—it would not have been *comme-il-faut!*'

'A dear old romantic tumbled-down place,' repeated the Baron, bitterly. 'Yes! that is the fittest name for the only rest my folly has left for the sole of my foot. Bah! do not let us talk of it any more. Monsieur will bring you to visit me there, I trust, and old Denise shall receive you with all the reverence befitting your own position, if not with the luxury a De Nesselrode should be able to lavish upon his guests. Sing to me again, mesdemoiselles. Let me forget the memories this little conversation has provoked, in listening to your voices.'

So Ange struck up the plaintive air of 'Sun of my soul,' and we all joined in the evening hymn together. Its last chords were dying away, when Mr. Lovett's footstep was heard entering the *salle*. The Baron rose at once to join him, but before he had time to leave the room, Tessie and Ange had flown past him to welcome their father home. Consequently, he and I were left for one brief moment together.

'Did you forget your promise, mademoiselle?' he asked me, in a low earnest voice.

'I did not, monsieur.'

He made no answer, but he threw one long searching glance upon me before he left the room, and I sat there, thinking what a pity it was that he was so careless and dissipated, and what a desirable husband he would make for Tessie, if he could only be converted to see the errors of his ways,

CHAPTER X.

CHÂTEAU DES ROSES.

I THOUGHT of this long after I went to bed that night, and for several succeeding days. I felt sure that Tessie liked the Baron, and indeed few girls with hearts that were disengaged could have helped doing so. He was very handsome, with that dark Southern beauty which bespeaks fire and energy, and all that makes a man attractive to a woman. And he was interesting—a more dangerous circumstance still. A halo of romance hung around his ill-fortune and his solitude, even though both had been induced by his own misdeeds. And I doubt, moreover, whether a man's errors, unless directed towards herself, ever closed a woman's heart against him. Although we are but too often the tempters and destroyers of the other sex, we like to flatter ourselves with the idea that we were sent into this world to be their guardian angels. The instinct of maternity, too, is rampant in the breasts of most of us, and a sick man or a naughty man is for the time being very like a child, something that is to be petted and tended and caressed, or coaxed and reprimanded and forgiven. I never heard the girls mention the young Baron de Nesselrode without a word of pity or excuse, and I too had much the same feeling for him.

But I had heard that his present state of poverty was not to last for ever. The interest of his large fortune alone was being annually swallowed by his greedy creditors ; and if the Baron could only be persuaded to lose no more money in the interim, a few years' probation would certainly set him free again. Meanwhile his family had utterly refused to assist him, over which piece of cruelty I had heard Tessie properly indignant. But privately I argued that in all probability his family had not the means of doing so. The Baron de Nesselrode was the representative of his race, and his relations were naturally incensed to find that his extravagance had led him to represent it in a ruinous old château at St. Pucelle.

The great thing to be done now, I said to myself, was to persuade him to give up that fatal habit of gambling, which we heard that he still continued to practise at more than one private house in the town.

If he would only learn to be wise in time, and to see the beauties of Tessie's character as I saw them, what a charming couple they would make! She was so thoroughly good and amiable. Each day I seemed to discover some fresh trait in her disposition which rendered her more worthy of my affection; and I pictured her to myself as the future Baronne de Nesselrode, and thought how well she would look the part, and how faithfully she would discharge the duties of her position as wife and mother and mistress of the household.

I wonder now why I never thought of the probability of the Baron preferring Ange to her sister—Ange, with her lovely, ever-changing countenance, her childlike gaiety of disposition, her ardent faith in religion and her father—but it never struck me that it might be so.

Tessie, with her quiet, somewhat pensive air, and her softly-braided flaxen locks, was always the ideal Baronne that figured in my airy castles; whilst bright-haired, blushing Ange was nowhere.

But the first thing, of course, to be done was to convert Armand de Nesselrode; and with that idea seething in my brain, I was very pleased, a few days afterwards, to hear that Mr. Lovett had arranged to take us all over to the Château that very afternoon.

'Hilda, it will be delightful!' cried Ange, dancing about me in her glee. 'You don't know how often Tessie and I have longed to see inside the old Château.'

'And Monsieur le Baron has never asked you all these years?'

'Never once—until last Sunday; indeed, I believe we shall be the first people in St. Pucelle who have set foot inside it. The poor Baron is ashamed of his poverty, so Madame says. I know he has only one servant to wait on him: I have seen her at market. She looks like a veritable old *châtelaine.* I should never dare to ask her to clean my boots. But I must go, Hilda, or I shall not be back again by twelve o'clock. I have five people to call upon within an hour.'

And off she ran, with a little basket on her arm, to see her poor.

I have forgotten to mention what a charitable heart Ange Lovett had. Not the charity that enters poor people's homes without knocking, and sows good advice and platitudes broadcast, to bring up a crop of curses and complaints ; but a large-hearted love, that saw no distinction between herself and them except that made by poverty, and greater need of friendship. When I saw her stop and salute her humbler friends, I was not surprised to hear they called her '*Petite Ange*' even to that day.

Yet she carried them neither food nor money : she had none to spare. The basket on her arm held some trifling remembrance, perhaps : a rag doll, manufactured by herself, for a sick child ; the Sunday cap of some old woman which she had turned and made to look as good as new ; or a bottle of physic for cough or ague, concocted by Madame Marmoret, and which was about the only thing in which that unpleasant domestic seemed willing to accommodate herself to the wishes of her young mistresses. So, although Ange possessed nothing wherewith to win the affections of her poor neighbours, beyond her ready sympathy and beaming smile, she was the cherished friend of every one of them ; and even the Abbé Morteville used to say that he always knew, when called upon to visit the sick, if the little Angel of St. Pucelle had been there before him or no. Sweet Ange ! She used to laugh at Tessie and me, and call us lazy, because we did not join her in her work of love ; but the fact was that she left us nothing to do. There was scarcely a day that she had not flitted in and out of half the cottages in St. Pucelle. She lived amongst the poor as though she had been one of themselves.

We were an expectant party as we walked up together to the Château des Roses, as the Baron's domicile was romantically called, for the girls had talked to me so much on the subject, that I had become almost as curious to find myself within its walls as they were. I found that the château was situated quite a mile away from St. Pucelle. Two massive pillars that had once supported the gates, and were surmounted by wolves' heads carved in stone, the armorial bearing of the family of De Nesselrode, became visible some time before we reached the entrance. When we had gained it, we discovered that the way was open : the gate being off its hinges and thrown carelessly amongst the bushes within. To the top of either pillar had climbed a rose-tree, the fragrant blossoms of which were hanging halfway to the ground ; whilst various costly shrubs, which had once been planted about the entrance with a due regard to effect, had obtruded their luxuriant growth until it encroached upon the highway.

'Is not this a regular wilderness of sweets ?' said Angela. 'These are the roses, papa, that I told the Baron I had so often picked in passing. I wonder if he has more of them within ; for if so, I must steal a bouquet before we return again.'

We had little time to wonder, for as we took our way to the château by a pathway cut through the pinewood, which sheltered it on three sides from the mountain air, we discovered that it well deserved its name. We seemed to be surrounded by roses of every size and colour. They ran along the ground at our feet, they hung in clusters from the trees at our side, they entangled themselves in the skirts of our dresses and caught the flimsy trimmings of our hats. For myself, I thought I had never traversed such a labyrinth of beauty ; though the rose-trees, in common with everything else, bore the appearance of a long-sustained and utter neglect.

As we came in sight of the fine old château, which had originally been built of grey granite, but was much disfigured by having been restored in various places by common red brick, we saw our host approaching to greet us. He looked so picturesque in a black velveteen coat, with a little handkerchief of grey silk carelessly knotted about his throat, that I could not resist glancing at Tessie to see how his appearance struck her. To my disappointment, she was not looking at the Baron at all, but busily engaged in fastening a bunch of yellow rosebuds in her bosom.

Well, Tessie cared for something higher than mere outward seeming, perhaps. So much the better ! Her happiness, when it came, would be all the more lasting and to be depended on. Still, Monsieur le Baron did look very graceful and aristocratic in his artistic suit—there was no manner of doubt about that !

We all rushed at him, open-mouthed, with praises of his lovely roses.

'*Ah, les roses*,' he said, indifferently. 'Yes, they are very abundant ; and I am only too flattered that mesdemoiselles should deign to honour my poor flowers with their regard ! But my little *goûter* is waiting for you, and I trust that your walk has given you an appetite. Mademoiselle, will you permit me to conduct you into the Château des Roses ?'

He offered his arm to me as he spoke, and I was surprised that he should not have chosen Tessie instead, until I remembered that Mr. Lovett had told several of his friends that he regarded me as his eldest daughter.

The entrance-hall to the château was very imposing; only, had I not known it was inhabited by a gentleman of the nineteenth century, I should certainly have imagined I was being introduced to the residence of some feudal chief of the tenth instead. Suits of armour, coated with rust, covered the walls; on the stone floor were laid numerous rough skins of animals which the Baron had killed in the chase. A stand, filled with all sorts of murderous weapons, ornamented one end of the hall; whilst on the other hung an arras of tapestry, faded into indistinctness, and moth-eaten until it would hardly hold together. Here we encountered Denise, the old *châtelaine*, as Ange had designated her—an ancient dame who had once been the Baron's nurse, and had followed him into his exile with a fidelity as rare as it is beautiful. As I saw this old servant, whose appearance was the very picture of modest decorum, receiving her young master's guests with as much state as though she had had a band of domestics behind her to execute her orders, I could not help thinking that there must be something good left in the man who, in the midst of misfortune brought on his own head, could yet command the service and fidelity of so thoroughly respectable a woman.

'Denise,' said the Baron, 'these young ladies have condescended to honour the château with their presence for a few hours. I commend them, during their visit, to your care.'

'Will mesdemoiselles follow me upstairs and remove their walking attire before partaking of *goûter?*' inquired the old servant, and we were very thankful, after a hot and dusty walk, to bathe our hands and faces in the cool spring water she had provided for us.

'I never saw anything like this in my life before,' exclaimed Tessie, as we followed Denise up a wide staircase into a long corridor lined with flapping tapestry, and ornamented with grim oil-paintings of the martyred saints. 'Could you not fancy, Hilda, this corridor at dead of night peopled with the ghosts of these poor martyrs and ringing with their groans?'

Old Denise crossed herself.

'Do not speak of it, mademoiselle,' she said. 'The blessed martyrs are in heaven, and would not return to this earth if they could; and as for the spirits of others, surely *Le bon Dieu* would never permit them to terrify a poor old woman like me. Though, for the matter of that, there has always been a legend in our family that one of my dear master's noble ancestors, Le Sieur Armand de Valois, still walks the Château des Roses, which was his favourite summer residence when alive; and that is the reason, mesdemoiselles, that the old house is in so sad a condition of ruin and decay, for no one has cared to keep it up or live in it.'

'I wonder you were not afraid to come here, then, madame,' I remarked.

'I should not have been afraid to go anywhere with my dear master, mademoiselle; and since those thieves who stripped him of his rightful property left him no shelter but this, why, I had no choice but to follow and take care of him.'

'It does you honour!' said Tessie, as we entered the bed-chamber.

Such a chamber! uncarpeted and uncurtained, with a huge bedstead of carved oak, a Venetian mirror which distorted our features until we did not recognise ourselves—and for the purposes of washing, a brass ewer and basin shining like burnished gold, but placed upon a table of ebony. The towels offered us were of the finest fringed damask, but Denise was profuse in her apologies for the humbleness of the accommodation she had prepared.

'This is not as it should be,' she said sorrowfully, 'but mesdemoiselles must be gracious and overlook our poverty. When Monsieur le Baron told me that ladies were coming to the château, you might have knocked me down with a feather. "Ladies," I said, "and not a room to show them into!"

'But my dear master assured me you would excuse it. Ah, mesdemoiselles! until those thieves and robbers restore his rights to him, what can you expect? We have no money to replace these things. But when that day comes,' exclaimed the old woman, brightening up, 'then his friends and his enemies alike shall see what the Baron de Nesselrode can do. They shall be fine times, mesdemoiselles, when we go back to our château at Versailles, and our châlet in beautiful Switzerland, and above all, our hôtel in Paris. The Château des Roses may fall to the ground then—we shall need it no longer. But, meanwhile, we have sore need of patience—Heaven knows!'

'But this is all very beautiful,' I said. 'What could be better? I would not have it changed for worlds, if it were mine.'

Denise shook her head despondently.

'Mademoiselle is too good to say so,' she replied, 'but if she and these young ladies will excuse me, I will descend again and see that the *salle* is prepared for their reception.'

CHAPTER XI.

THE VENETIAN GLASS.

THE *goûter* was laid in a long narrow room, which evidently had once been a banqueting hall. Remnants of exquisitely stained glass still ornamented its windows, although the ravages made in them by time had been replaced by ordinary white panes. Tall, straight-backed chairs, carved in black oak, and furnished with green cushions, the embossed velvet covering of which was both faded and rent, stood at the table for our accommodation, whilst from the panelling of the walls looked down upon us an almost obliterated collection of the Baron's ancestors.

Although the summer sun was shining through the windows, casting rainbow lights of ruby and violet and amber over the damask tablecloth, and the roses and clematis were hanging in clusters about the casement, there was a weird unearthly feeling about this chamber that made me shudder.

An artist would have fallen into raptures over the old oaken floors and wainscoting; the leash of wolfhounds that lay stretched out blinking in the sunshine, and watching their master's eye as for a revelation; the fragments of stained glass; the blackened ancestors. But to me, the aspect of the whole place spelt *Ruin*, and I feared lest our host should read my feelings in my face.

That did not, however, seem likely. There he sat at the head of the table, dispensing his simple hospitality as though he had been entertaining crowned heads at a royal banquet. He made no apology for the repast he offered us. It was the best he had to give, and he credited us with too much good taste to wish it better. When he pledged us in the *vin ordinaire* of the country, poured into the most delicate of Venetian wine-glasses, the slender stems of which were encircled by a tiny twist of blue and their bowls dotted with specks of gold, he might have been a prince drinking to his courtiers in a vintage of fabulous value. Those glasses alone were a marvel in themselves, and, mere fragmentary remains as they were of a past glory, told tales of what that glory must have been.

I thought, as I balanced mine between my finger and thumb what an exquisite specimen of workmanship it was, and how I should like to possess it and keep it in my bedroom for my own delectation, to place the first violets of spring in, or the first lilies of summer. It looked so much too fragile and precious to be handled for ordinary purposes.

I was thinking thus, when some one spoke to me—the Baron himself, perhaps—and I was startled into letting the wine-glass slip from my hand. It struck the table, and was shivered into a thousand fragments. I blushed to scarlet. Had the accident happened in the house of an ordinary host, I should have thought little of it, but to Monsieur le Baron, who was so poor! I tried to stammer out an apology, but the words failed on my lips. Mr. Lovett saw my embarrassment, and laughed heartily at it. I had already commenced to find out that his notions were beyond his means, and that he did not sympathise very strongly with any ideas of economy or restriction.

Tessie and Ange looked as concerned as I did. The Baron alone continued the conversation as if nothing had occurred. But I could not allow the matter to rest there.

'Monsieur!' I said, 'I am so *very* sorry. I was only just thinking how beautiful this little glass was, and how much too delicate to hold anything except spring flowers.'

'Then I am sorry also, mademoiselle! But was that the only one of the pattern you admire? Cannot we find another that will do as well to hold your blossoms?'

I remonstrated with this proposal, although he made Denise bring the remainder of her stock of glasses and spread them out upon the table before us. There they sparkled in their prismatic hues of blue and red and gold, and their elegant fragile shapes and twisted stems. But I refused to do more than look at them. I was too clumsy, I averred, to be the possessor of such delicate things. One such injury to art, as I had done that day, was enough for me!

The Baron did not press the point, but, as we had finished luncheon, he unleashed his hounds, and, calling them to follow us, led the way into the tangled wilderness he called his garden. As we passed the stables and coachhouse, I perceived that they were shut up and empty. Their owner had not even the means sufficient to keep a riding-horse for himself. As I glanced at his noble bearing and pictured the luxury in which he had probably been reared, I did feel intense pity for his lonely and impoverished condition.

'We must not forget the object for which you honoured the château with a visit,' he said, as we traversed the grounds, which were of some extent, 'which was to ascertain if any life remains in the poor old organ; but I must show you my pet first.'

He pushed aside the trailing branches of the bushes as he spoke, and led the way up to a large cave, or den, surrounded by a palisade of stout wood. Inside it, running restlessly up and down, was a splendid wolf of the Piron breed. We girls rather shrunk back as we came in sight of the animal.

'You need not be in the slightest degree alarmed, mesdemoiselles,' said our host; 'for the palings are very strong, and "L'Empereur" is wonderfully tame!' And, in proof of his assertion, the Baron walked up to the palisades and stroked the wolf's head. '*Eh bien, mon ami!*' he exclaimed, 'are you glad to see me again? It is some time since I have paid you a visit, *mon pauvre Empereur.*'

'Monsieur, where did you get him?' asked Ange.

'I shot his mother in the forest, Mademoiselle Ange, two years ago. Empereur was then a little cub, of perhaps a month or six weeks old. He was easily caught, and I brought him home and kept him in the château, until he took to biting the heels of Denise rather too vigorously as she went about her work, and I was compelled to have this apartment erected for him out of doors.'

'He is a strange pet to keep,' I observed.

'So several people have told me; but Empereur and I have sympathies in common. His estates, like mine, have been confiscated; for, since St. Pucelle has been a town, the wolves have been driven farther and farther back into the interior of the forest of Piron. Then he is solitary, and so am I; and his misfortunes make him savage, as mine have done to me; and we thirst in common, I think, for the blood of our enemies, and choose the night-time to moan over our wrongs. Is it not so, Empereur?' concluded the Baron, with a forced laugh, as he thrust his hand again between the open palings, and rubbed the head of his favourite.

'And a wolf is your family crest, is it not, monsieur?' I said, with a view to cover the Baron's last remark, which had made us all feel rather uncomfortable.

'True, mademoiselle. It was granted to be borne by my ancestor, Godefroi de Nesselrode, and his descendants, by one of the first Ducs de Nemours. The Duc and De Nesselrode were rding, unattended and unarmed, when an assassin made an attempt upon the life of the former. His first shot, however, failed; and, before he had time to fire a second time, my ancestor had leapt from his horse and flown at his throat, never leaving hold until he had strangled him where he lay. As a wolf will invariably fly at the throat of a man, if it is possible to do so, his princely master, the Duc de Nemours, was pleased to command that that animal should be carried as a crest upon the helmets of the De Nesselrodes from that time forward.'

'It was a very brave thing for your ancestor to do,' said Tessie.

'He could hardly have done anything else,' replied the Baron, quietly. 'But would it be agreeable to you now, mademoiselles, to try the organ we have spoken of?'

'Yes, yes; let us return to the house,' interposed Mr. Lovett. 'It is too hot to stand about, so early in the afternoon.'

The fact is, the old gentleman had made an excellent luncheon, and began to miss the nap which he invariably took at that hour of the day. So, his will being law to all of us, we retraced our steps to the château, and were introduced to what had originally been its private chapel. But what a desecration appeared to have taken place there!

The altar was disrobed and bare, and what ornaments it had possessed had vanished. Over it hung a crucifix, covered with a layer of dust an inch in thickness. On one side was erected a little altar to the Virgin. Her statue still rested there, on a cloth of what had been white silk, now brown with dirt and age, with the yellow lace hanging from it in tattered fragments. A dusty wreath of artificial flowers stood before it, and a little lamp which still held the rancid remains of oil. A row of oak benches was on either side the altar; but, beyond what I have mentioned, and a few votive offerings of little value which hung against the wall, all traces of this place having been one of prayer had disappeared.

As we entered it, Ange gave vent to an exclamation of dismay.

'Oh, monsieur! why do you not have this chapel properly cleaned, and kept in order——?' But there the child stopped, remembering his poverty.

'To what intent, mademoiselle?' he asked her.

'Oh, because—because—it *has* been so beautiful!' she replied. 'Papa, what would we not give to have this chapel carried down into St. Pucelle, and to use it for our services, instead of the schoolroom? Does it not seem ten thousand pities that it should be wasted like this?'

Mr. Lovett had already ensconced himself on the corner of one of the benches, and put two cushions at his back, preparatory to passing into the land of dreams.

'A great pity, my little maid,' he answered, sleepily. 'But I am not sure how De Nesselrode would approve of your carrying it off, nevertheless.' And then he gave two huge yawns, and closed his eyes.

'It will all be restored some day,' I said cheerily, 'and made more beautiful perhaps than it was before.'

'Do you think so, mademoiselle?' inquired the Baron of me.

'I hope so, monsieur. And what a fine organ! If its tone is only as good as its appearance, we shall have a treat.'

'It has not been touched for years,' he said, as he opened it, 'until I told Denise to dust it for you this morning.'

Tessie seated herself at the instrument, and commenced to play some passages from the 'Stabat Mater,' whilst I worked the bellows for her. The organ had been left to the tender mercies of so many winters, that its tone left a good deal to be desired. Still, it was a very fine instrument, and only required a few fires and regular practice to bring it once more into working order. I was wondering to myself what this visit would lead to, and if Tessie would receive an invitation to come up to the château and play the organ, until she had played herself into the owner's heart, when I found that the owner had crept round to the back of the instrument, and was standing beside the bellows and myself.

Ange was busily engaged setting the Virgin's altar in order, and dusting the ornaments with her pocket-handkerchief; Mr. Lovett was slumbering blissfully on the oaken seat, and the notes of the 'Mater Dolorosa' were still pealing out from under Tessie's skilful fingers.

As far as what we said or did was concerned, the Baron de Nesselrode and I might have been quite alone, and now was the opportunity, I thought, to put in a word for the future of my sweet Tessie and the man who stood beside me.

But it was he who commenced the conversation.

'Mademoiselle, why do you think that this ruined chapel will some day be restored?'

'Because I believe that when you *can* do it, you *will*.'

'But will that opportunity ever arise?'

'That I cannot say, monsieur; neither have I the right to inquire. Only—I have been told——'

'*What?*'

'That you will not always be as you are now.'

I said the words timidly, but directly they had left my lips they sounded terribly bold, and I coloured under the conviction that they were so.

'Forgive me, monsieur,' I added; 'I should not have said that. I feel I have entrenched on your private affairs.'

'There is nothing to forgive, mademoiselle. I have ruined myself. The story is patent to all. It is also true that by a long course of privation I may regain my former position. But it is not at all likely.'

'Why not?'

In my interest and surprise I overlooked the fact that this question was entrenching still more upon his private affairs than the former remark had been.

'Because I think I shall return to Paris. I am sick and tired of the life I lead here, and am ready to sacrifice my future itself in order to break through the chains that keep me a prisoner in St. Pucelle.'

'Oh no! monsieur, you must be patient! You must not do that!'

What made me speak to this stranger in so unaccountable a manner?

Some sudden thought of Tessie, and that she would be left to pine in solitude in St. Pucelle, whilst the Baron was recklessly throwing away his last chances of respectability and honour in Paris, had put them into my mind and made me forget myself. I expected that my companion would be offended at my audacity, but he did not even look surprised.

'Why should I not do so?' he answered, quietly; 'I live only for myself. No one cares what becomes of my future! It is mine to do as I will with; and this life is too intolerable to be endured for one's self alone.'

'You may not always be alone,' I said, thinking of the fair-haired woman divided from us only by the organ.

The Baron laughed incredulously.

'This is a pretty château, is it not, to bring a young lady home to, mademoiselle, and ask her to live upon roses? They smell sweet enough as they adorn your bosom, but you would not find them very satisfying as your daily food.'

At that I laughed also.

'No, indeed! Still, monsieur——'

'I wait the commands of mademoiselle——'

'Even if no one cares what becomes of your future, you have the honour and glory of the past in your keeping.'

He made no answer to this remark, and when I ventured to look up in his face I saw that he was biting his lips.

Whether he would have replied to me I know not, but at that moment the notes of the organ ceased, the bellows gave a great squeak, and Ange came laughing to ask us if she had not already made a great improvement in the appearance of the chapel.

'If Monsieur le Baron will only let me repair the altar-cloth and clean the ornaments it will make the whole place look different. And the organ sounds lovely, Tessie! I wish you could have heard it yourself from a little distance. Has it not been a pleasure to you to touch an organ again? You have never had an opportunity of playing on one since we were last in Brussels.'

'Yes, I have enjoyed it greatly,' replied Tessie. 'The notes are a little stiff from damp and disuse, and I do not think you worked the bellows very regularly, Hilda; but otherwise we have nothing like this in St. Pucelle. I only wish I could carry it away in my pocket.'

'If it is really a pleasure to you to use the instrument, mademoiselle, I trust you will regard it as your own,' said the Baron, 'and play on it as often as may be convenient to yourself. The key of the chapel is always left in the hands of Denise, and I will give her orders to see that it is kept in a fit state for your accommodation.'

'Oh, that will be delightful!' cried Ange, who was much more enthusiastically disposed than her sister; 'and I may have charge of the rest of it, may I not, monsieur—and keep the altar dressed with flowers, as I do for papa on Sundays?'

'Anything that Mademoiselle Ange chooses to do, she will find me grateful for,' replied the Baron. 'And Mademoiselle Marsh, too, I hope this is not the last time she will honour the château with her presence.'

'Oh! I will come when Tessie does,' I answered, laughing, 'to blow the bellows, though I have not incurred much gratitude for the exertions I have undergone on her behalf today.'

'Mademoiselle Lovett says nothing herself,' remarked De Nesselrode.

'Because it depends so entirely upon papa,' replied Tessie, blushing; 'and he has so many engagements in the parish and otherwise, that I do not know when he may be able to bring us up to the château again.'

And then we all remembered the difficulties that lay in the way of three young, unmarried ladies making any practical use of an organ that stood in the residence of an unprotected bachelor.

'Papa *must* bring us up; we will *make* him!' exclaimed Ange, as she unceremoniously squatted upon her sleeping father's knee and kissed him back to consciousness. 'Papa! wake up! You've been asleep a great deal too long—and tell us how soon you will bring us to the château again to play upon this lovely organ.'

'Eh! eh! what?' said Mr. Lovett, as he started up and realised where he was. 'Why, you little puss! you are enough to frighten a man into a fit. What is it you want? Is it time to go home?'

'Pretty nearly, papa, and quite time for you to wake up and make yourself agreeable. Monsieur le Baron says we may practise on his organ every day; but you will have to bring us to the château. Will you come to-morrow again?'

'No, no, no! How can I come to-morrow? It is Saturday, and I shall have my sermon to think over and prepare, and a dozen other things to do,' replied Mr. Lovett, taking the girl's words seriously. 'Besides, it is such a hill to climb! My breath is too short to accomplish it often. If you want to run about the château as if it belonged to you, you must get some old woman to chaperon you—Mrs. Carolus, for instance, or Mrs. Petherton.'

'Or Miss Markham. I'm sure she is old enough,' interposed Ange, with a most unusual degree of acrimony for her.

'Miss Markham is an unmarried lady, my dear : she would be of no more use in satisfying the exigencies of etiquette than yourself. However, we will talk over this scheme later, for it is really time that we were moving homewards now. Baron, we have to thank you for your excellent hospitality, and to hope you will soon give us the opportunity to return it. I shall see you this evening, perhaps, if you have nothing better to do.'

'Without fail, monsieur,' replied the Baron, warmly; and then, when we girls had reassumed our walking attire, he accompanied us to the entrance of the château, and bid us farewell, with numerous entreaties that we would not allow many days to elapse before we came back to play upon the old organ again.

As we walked home together, Mr. Lovett informed us that the Baron de Nesselrode reminded him powerfully of the great friend and patron of his earlier days—the noble poet, of whom, *par excellence*, England has reason to be proud, Lord Amor.

'Amor was the most misunderstood and misjudged of all God's creatures,' he said warmly. 'He was afflicted with so mighty a genius and so keen a sensitiveness, that his mind could scarcely be said to be in a normal condition ; and added to that, he possessed a temperament which left him open to every sort of temptation. I perceive much of his character reproduced in Armand de Nesselrode. Without possessing Amor's genius, which does not appear once in a century, he has yet a very poetical and imaginative brain, which in his enforced solitude is likely to produce a morbid condition of thought. We must induce him to mix amongst us as much as possible.'

'It is a pity he has not more love for reading, or else more companions of his own age,' I observed. 'Utter idleness is certain to make a man fall back upon vice for amusement.'

My trustee glanced at me keenly. Did he imagine I could possibly know more of the Baron's habits than he did?

'There is not much opportunity for the practice of vice in St. Pucelle, my dear,' he observed.

'Is there not, sir? Then St. Pucelle must be a very uncommon sort of place. But, if all one hears is true, the Baron's great failing has been the love of gambling: and that form of vice is feasible wherever a pack of cards is to be procured.'

I fancied I had made Mr. Lovett quite angry by my insinuation against his friend.

'That is a hard judgment, my dear Hilda—harder than I like to hear proceed from the mouth of so young a woman. You must not think because poor De Nesselrode may occasionally while away the weary hours of his exile by a game of cards, that he has therefore necessarily not abandoned the fatal habit of gambling. There is no harm in a game of cards. I sometimes indulge in one myself; and I should be glad to hear you speak a little more charitably of your neighbours, my dear Hilda. You are too young to be suspicious. Whatever our friends' faults may be, let us remember our own, and preserve a generous silence.'

I felt very small under this clerical rebuke, particularly as the girls were regarding their father as if he were a Solomon called to judgment, and proportionately disposed to censure my boldness.

'I did not intend to be uncharitable,' I answered humbly; 'and perhaps my experience of life has made me suspicious. But, at all events, I may say that I think it would be safer, under the circumstances, for the Baron to abandon cards altogether, even as a game.'

'He is the best judge of his own affairs,' replied Mr. Lovett, curtly; and then we started a pleasanter topic, and dropped the one in hand.

At the usual hour in the evening, Armand de Nesselrode came. We heard his voice in the *salle*, although we did not see him, as the girls said it was their father's particular desire that he should not be disturbed after we had risen from the dinner-table, and left him to the enjoyment of his wine and cigar and the conversation of any friend who might look in upon him. But on this evening I felt particularly curious to learn what was going on in the *salle*. I could distinguish the gentlemen's voices as they laughed and talked with one another; but I wanted to see what they were about. The new-born interest I had conceived in the Baron's future prospects had much to do with my curiosity; because I thought, until I had some proof that he still practised it, I should never have the audacity to speak to him openly about giving up the amusement that had been his ruin.

So by-and-by I yawned, and rising, told Tessie and Ange that the day's expedition had tired me, and I should go to bed; at which announcement they laughed, and called me lazy, but raised no objection to the plan; and I reached my chamber, without either having offered to accompany me.

Madame Marmoret called after me, in her coarse voice, to know if I intended coming down again that evening; but I would not answer her. Madame and I were foes, although there had never been an open rupture between us. I disliked her insolence and familiarity too much to be civil to her; and she hated me because I took no notice of her rudeness.

It was ten o'clock as I entered my bedroom. The dear old carriage-clock was ticking away upon the mantelpiece to tell me so. I wrapped myself in a dark waterproof cloak, and throwing the hood over my head, passed through the French windows at the end of the corridor that led out into the garden, from which a door in the wall opened upon the road.

For a few moments I lingered at the flowerbeds, picking a blossom here and there, for fear the girls might follow me, and suspect the motive of my absence; but no one came. So, plucking up my courage, I gently opened the garden-door, and crept noiselessly up the wooden steps that led to the *salle*. One window, half-hidden by clustering tendrils of vine, abutted on the platform at the head of the steps, and through it the whole of the *salle* was visible.

It was as I had thought and feared. Mr. Lovett and the Baron were seated opposite to each other, with the green-shaded lamp between them, and their hands full of cards. The table was strewn with counters of various colours, and two or three little piles of money stood at my trustee's elbow. Even as I stood and gazed at them, afraid to breathe lest my presence should be discovered, I saw the Baron lose again, and add another coin to the heap on the other side the table, at which Mr. Lovett laughed, and exclaimed:

'*A la bonne fortune, mon cher.* Try again! It only requires perseverance to turn the shadiest luck.'

As I crept back to my bedchamber and prepared myself for rest, I felt very sick and miserable. I knew the world was full of wickedness and sorrow, but I never seemed so fully to have realised it as I did that night; and I wished—oh, so truly!—that I were safe with *her*, wherever she might be, and had finished the bitter task of learning the lesson of life. If I missed her at one time more than another, it was at such moments as these, when I felt confused and stupefied under the shock of discovering more sin and misery in the world than I had thought it capable of containing, and had no bosom to fly to for comfort and reassurance.

I hoped that neither Tessie nor Ange would ask to see me again that evening. I wanted to go to bed, and lose in sleep, if possible, the uncomfortable feelings that had taken possession of me. After which, I was not over-pleased, as may be supposed, to hear Madame Marmoret's voice demanding admittance at my door.

'You cannot come in, Madame, indeed! It is impossible! I am just about to step into my bed.'

'*Eh bien!* It is no concern of mine. Step into your bed, if it pleases you to do so. But I wish I had not taken the trouble to follow you upstairs, which I should not have done, except for the entreaties of Monsieur le Baron. In my day, a young woman was pleased to be taken notice of, especially if she did not deserve it; but 'tis all the same to me. I will go downstairs again, and tell Monsieur le Baron that you refuse me the entrance to your chamber.'

'Monsieur le Baron!' I repeated in surprise. 'What on earth has he to do with your being here?'

'Ah, I thought I would arouse your curiosity! We may be extremely modest and reserved, and not have a civil word to throw at our inferiors; but the name of a baron is at all times better than that of a commoner, and likely to command more attention—is it not so?'

'Madame Marmoret, if you have a message of any importance for me, please to deliver it at once, and let me go to rest.'

'It is no message, then, but a packet, which I have been charged to deliver into your hands; and if you will not take it, I will just lay it in your doorway, and the first foot that comes past may smash it to pieces!'

Aggravated at the woman's impertinence, and curious to learn what a packet from the Baron could possibly contain for me, I opened the door, and received a small parcel carefully enveloped with paper.

'Is there no message to be taken back again?" demanded Madame Marmoret, grinning like a wicked old witch at me.

'None. I have no idea what the packet can hold.'

'Ah, you wish me to believe that, mademoiselle, of course! and when I was paid to deliver it, too! Well, I've done my duty, and you can do yours.'

And, with these words and a harsh laugh, Madame took her way downstairs again.

I carried the parcel eagerly to the light, and took off its manifold wrappings, when it disclosed an exquisitely-moulded Venetian vase of the most costly workmanship, and far superior to anything which we had seen at the Château des Roses that day. At first I could not believe that it was intended for me instead of Tessie; but a little card that fell out of the bowl reassured me. On it, beneath the printed words, 'Armand de Nesselrode,' was written, '*Pour les fleurs de Mademoiselle Hilda.*'

I felt very much pleased. As an acquisition alone, the Venetian vase would have delighted me; because I possessed a cultivated taste, and took keen interest in all specimens of art, ancient and modern.

It would stand on my mantelshelf, and be 'a joy for ever,' with its fragile loveliness and perfect grace of form.

But far above the value of his little gift, I hailed the evident goodwill of the giver. He had not taken my frank remarks in bad part. My vase was a proof that he was not offended with me. What opportunities, then, might I not hope to gain in the future, to warn him from pursuing the path which my own eyes had told me he still trod!

Before Madame had delivered my parcel, I was afraid lest the illegal means by which I had gained my knowledge might for ever prevent my making use of it. Now I felt no fear about it.

The Baron de Nesselrode had paved the way for me. He could not complain if I took advantage of his kindness to return it. He had given me a present, and he should receive one in return. If ever I were on the brink of offending him by my good advice, I would plead my little vase as an excuse for trying to return the kindness he had shown me in the only coin I possessed.

CHAPTER XII.

ARTHUR THRALE.

THE sun was streaming down the narrow rocky street of St. Pucelle in one long, unbroken line of light. I could hear the shrill voice of Madame Marmoret screaming to frighten away the pigeons, as they alighted on the line she had erected in the courtyard to hang her spotless caps and aprons on; and Tessie disturbed me in the midst of writing a long letter home—somehow, I found it difficult to get out of the habit of calling Mrs. Sandiland's place of residence 'home'—to ask if I would take my work and go with her to sit on the brow of the hill that overlooked the valley of Artois.

'It is "pig-killing day" in St. Pucelle, Hilda, and you will find it so much pleasanter to be out of the town than in it.'

'*Pig-killing day!*' I repeated. 'Tessie, what *do* you mean?'

'Only that each family here keeps a pig, and they kill them all on the same day. Also that they have an unpleasant custom of sacrificing the animals in front of their houses, and the poor things *do* squeak so.'

I threw all my writing materials to one side in a moment.

'Mercy on us! When do they begin? Let us get out of this as soon as possible, Tessie.'

She laughed heartily at my dismay.

'You need not be in such a terrible hurry, Hilda. I think you may give yourself a few minutes' grace. But it really does turn the street into such a slaughter-house, that everybody makes a point of going as far from home as possible.'

'Where is Ange?'

'She has gone up to see Mère Fromard, whose husband is worse this morning, and she promised to join us on the hill on her way back.'

'And your papa?'

'I left him in the *salle.* He is just going to start by the diligence for Artois. He has some business to transact at Rille to-day, with his friend Mr. Felton.'

'Excuse me for a moment then, Tessie. I want to speak to him before he goes.'

I flew downstairs as I spoke, and came upon Mr. Lovett in the *salle*, carefully brushing his clerical hat before putting it on. I had a motive for my haste. As we postpone visiting the dentist day after day, and then, in a sudden fit of courage, rush off without deliberation, and have our tooth extracted before we have had time to repent, so had I delayed speaking to my trustee on a matter of importance, and knew that unless I took my dilemma, like a bull, by the horns, I should never be brave enough to extricate myself from it. This dilemma was the want of money. I had been in St. Pucelle now for a couple of months, and Mr. Lovett had never mentioned the subject to me. I had gone there on the understanding that fifty pounds of my little income was to be annually refunded me for pocket expenses, and I had arrived there almost penniless, for the necessary outlay connected with the breaking-up of my home and travelling to Belgium had absorbed nearly all the ready-money at my disposal. I had thrown out more than one hint, in the presence of Mr. Lovett, that a few francs would be acceptable to me, but they had had no effect, and I was now really in need of some trifles for my toilet.

Moreover, Ange would complete her eighteenth year in a week from that time, and I greatly desired to make her a little present on the occasion.

So I felt as desperate as a young woman can do who has no clean tuckers to put into her dresses, and has just discovered an alarming hole in the finger of her best pair of kid gloves.

Mr. Lovett looked up as I entered the *salle*, and saluted me with his bland, beautiful smile.

'Well, my dear Hilda, have you any commands for me in Rille? I am compelled to go there to-day, to transact some business with my good friend Mr. Felton; but I hope you will be able to make yourself very happy meanwhile, with your own occupations and the dear children's society.'

'Oh yes, Mr. Lovett; we shall be happy enough. We are just going to take our needlework to the brow of the hill, and stay there till all the pigs are killed.'

'A very wise decision,' he said, laughing softly, as he smoothed round the nap of his hat.

'But I wanted to speak to you first,' I stammered. 'I should be sorry to inconvenience you; but—but—I want frilling and such a lot of little things, Mr. Lovett; and—Mr. Warrington mentioned to me, you know, the arrangement you made with him about it, and—*could you let me have a little money, just to go on with?*'

The murder was out at last! I had made as much fuss over it as if I had been asking a favour, instead of demanding a right; but it was over—the tooth was out, and I breathed again.

What had Mr. Lovett to say in answer? At first, for the merest moment, I fancied that a flush of surprise or displeasure passed over his handsome features; but, if so, it vanished as quickly as it appeared, leaving nothing behind but his own frank, benevolent expression.

'Certainly, my dear girl, certainly. Why did you not mention it to me before? I shall be exceedingly annoyed if you delay asking for it one day after it is due. Let me see! When *was* it due?'

'I am not sure. It depends entirely upon how you intend to pay it to me. I have only been here two months, you know, Mr. Lovett.'

'Ah! Just so. And I generally give my girls their allowance every quarter. Still, it makes no difference to me, my dear Hilda; and you can have your money just exactly when you like. How much do you require?'

'I will take anything you choose to give me, sir.'

'Tut, tut, tut!' he said, as though annoyed by my want of confidence; 'it must be as *you* choose, my dear—it must be as you choose. What was the annual sum fixed on by Mr. Warrington for your private expenses? One hundred pounds?'

'Oh no, sir. Fifty!'

'That's not enough,' replied my guardian, decidedly. 'No young lady can dress according to her station for fifty pounds a year. We must make it eighty.'

'You are too kind to me, Mr. Lovett; but I should be very sorry to think my living here put you to any expense.'

'Nonsense, my dear Hilda! I do not pretend to be a rich man; but I must become poorer than I am before I consent to take one *sou* more than is absolutely necessary from the child of my dear old chum, Dick Marsh. So we will call the pin-money eighty pounds, my dear; and please to say no more about it. But I must not stay another minute, or I shall miss the diligence. Good-bye, and God bless you. How like you are to your father, to be sure! As you stand there, I could almost fancy it was dear old Dick come back and smiling at me.'

'How soon shall you be home again, Mr. Lovett?'

'Not till to-morrow morning, my child; but Tessie knows all about it. Good-bye, good-bye!' And, waving his stick at me, the benevolent old gentleman descended the steps and made his way down the road as quickly as he could.

I was very glad that he had decided to fix my private allowance at eighty pounds, for it raised his feelings of justice in my estimation. To tell truth, since I had been in St. Pucelle, I had more than once thought that a hundred a year was too much money to pay for my board and lodging, for my bedroom possessed the barest necessaries, and we—that is, I and the girls—lived with the greatest frugality. The mystery which hung about the meals I had not yet fathomed, although I had begun sadly to suspect the cause of it. On some days the dinners provided continued to be luxurious in the extreme, though, as I have said before, I refused to partake of them; on others, we were all alike compelled to dine upon the most meagre fare. It was evident, therefore, that the means of provisioning the household were not always forthcoming, though that was no reason that I should pay for more than I consumed. I did not, therefore, consider that I laid myself under any obligation to my guardian in consenting to his proposal, although I admired him for making it. Eighty pounds a year—twenty pounds every quarter—would be ample, not only to provide me with suitable clothing, but to leave a margin wherewith to indulge myself by making presents to my friends; and with the remainder of my income, Mr. Lovett would be fully indemnified for any extra expense I might prove in the household.

I returned to Tessie therefore quite satisfied with the result of my bravery. At the same time I wished that my guardian had given me a few francs in hand. But I felt certain he had only postponed it until he returned from Rille.

Under cover of this assurance, I talked openly to Tessie, as we walked together up the hill, of the interview that had taken place between her father and myself, and of the generous offer he had made me.

I was anxious to have her advice as to what would be the most suitable present I could purchase for Ange on her forthcoming birthday, for, in common with all her friends, I had learned to love the girl dearly, and was quite sure that nothing was to be found among the paltry little shops in St. Pucelle good enough for her acceptance.

'I should like to give her something *really* nice, Tessie; something that she wants very much. Do you know of anything? Never mind the price! I shall have much more money than I shall want for myself, and my greatest pleasure is in giving presents to those I care for. If you will decide what it shall be, I will ask Mrs. Carolus or Miss Markham to get it in Rille. I know they are going over there next week expressly to shop; and they will choose it probably quite as well as I should do myself.'

But Tessie, considering her love for her sister, was singularly indifferent on the subject. She coloured when I proposed it, as I thought with pleasure, but she gave me no help whatever.

'Ange's wants are so few,' she said, 'that I think it would be a pity to take much trouble about it, Hilda! She will be just as well pleased with a bunch of flowers from your hand as anything else. I, myself, intend to give her my new muslin apron, and I know she will say it is twice too good for her, and refuse it half-a-dozen times before she accepts it.'

'Now, Tessie! you are provoking,' I replied. 'One does not always ask before making a present if the reception of it is necessary to the happiness of one's friend; but surely we can think of some trifle that Ange would like me to get for her, whether she can do without it or not. Shall I buy a pair of ear-rings to match her silver cross?'

'Oh no, Hilda; pray don't!' cried Tessie, in a voice of such feminine alarm that I burst out laughing.

'Why not? They would look very pretty in her little ears.'

'They would be far too expensive a present to make her! She would not like it, and neither would papa. We have never worn ornaments of any kind; and Ange would not have that silver cross, excepting that it was given to Madame Marmoret at her own confirmation, and she gave it to Ange when she was quite a little baby.'

'And so that old vixen Madame Marmoret may make the child a handsome present, and I am forbidden to do so,' I replied, half offended. 'I shall not consult you any more, Tessie, but buy her just what I please.'

Tessie looked grave, but she said nothing more, and we walked on for a few minutes in silence. Then she began again:

'I am sure Ange would rather have a ribbon that you have already worn than the finest piece of jewellery that Rille could produce.'

But I clapped my hand over her mouth, and raced her up the hill till she was out of breath.

'And now if you dare to open your lips once more on that subject, I will push you all the way down again,' I said, laughing, and she was fain to laugh with me; for I was determined to indulge myself by buying something both good and handsome for my pretty Ange.

The conversation, however, simple as it was, seemed to have affected Tessie in no common degree. She was unusually silent as we sat side by side, diligently plying our needles, and she sighed more than once as she looked over the broad valley of Artois. Her mood was infectious. She made me thoughtful, too, and I began to muse over that grave in Norwood Cemetery, and the dear, dear face that lay beneath it.

'Tessie,' I said, suddenly, 'can you remember your mother?'

'No, Hilda! She died when I was only a few years old, and Ange an infant in long-clothes.'

'You are happy not to be able to remember her. You must miss her so much the less.'

'Do you think so? Sometimes I fancy I must miss her more. I have never had the benefit of her guidance or counsel, you know, Hilda!'

'That is true; but your father has supplied her place. A man's advice is better than that of a woman, however good and clever she may be.'

'Yes, I suppose it is, in most things; and papa has been the best and kindness of parents to us. Yet, if mamma had lived, Hilda, she might—I have always heard she was so fond of him—she might——'

But here the supposition of what her mother might have done was lost, in consequence of Tessie bursting into a flood of tears.

Her sudden emotion both surprised and shocked me. I had never dreamt that the death of a mother whom she had lost so early could have dwelt upon her mind to such a degree as this, neither had I ever seen her give vent to such violent grief before. Had it been Ange, I should not have been so much astonished, for the 'little maid' was romantic and easily moved to tears; but that Tessie, who had so calm and equable a disposition, should be so overcome was quite another thing.

I soothed her to the best of my ability, but the storm was as genuine as it was unaccountable to me, and some minutes elapsed before she was restored to anything like composure. I was just congratulating myself that it was over, and thanking Heaven that no one else had witnessed her weakness, when I perceived, to my annoyance, the gaunt figure of Mrs. Carolus climbing, by means of a stick, the steep and stony ascent in front of us.

'Here is Mrs. Carolus,' I said hastily. 'Do dry your eyes, Tessie, or the whole of St. Pucelle will be informed before to-morrow morning that I brought you out here and beat you.'

She laughed hysterically at the idea, and rose to her feet.

'Let me go back a little way and meet Ange, Hilda! I shall recover myself in five minutes, if I am left alone; but Mrs. Carolus's intrusive curiosity would be sure to set me off again.'

'Go, by all manner of means,' I replied, 'and leave me, like a second St. George, to face the dragon! Only come back as soon as your eyes have regained their normal condition, or the saint will be found to have turned tail as usual, leaving his stockings, darning-thread and needle behind him.'

This I said because I had suffered many things at the hands of Mrs. Carolus and Miss Markham during the last two months, and was noted for running away as soon as I saw them coming. Tessie smiled sadly and nodded acquiescence as she turned to ascend the hill.

'Oh, Miss Marsh!' cried Mrs. Carolus, now within a few yards of me; 'what an awfully steep hill this is! I really thought at one time that I could neither go backward nor forward. And the loose stones cut one's boots to ribbons. If I hadn't brought Willie's stick with me, I should never have had the courage to mount it. Why has Miss Lovett walked off just as I arrived?'

'She has gone back a little way to meet her sister. Why do you attempt to ascend the hill where there is no path, Mrs. Carolus? Boys and girls can do it, perhaps, and goats, but not——'

'Not older people, like you and me,' said Mrs. Carolus, as she cast herself jauntily on the sward beside me. 'Ah! that's just what I told Sophy Markham the other day. She will pretend to be so *very* young, you know—ridiculous it is in a woman of her age—and came skipping down the stairs two or three at a time, and the consequence was she sprained her ankle. I said it served her right, and she was angry with me, of course; but I am used to that. Mr. Lovett has gone to Rille to-day, I find.'

'He has—but how did you hear it?'

'By a very natural means, my dear, or perhaps you will say, an unnatural one. Sophia Markham has gone with him.'

'*With him!* In the same diligence, you mean.'

'Well, she could hardly do other than that, considering there is but one. No, I do not mean in the same diligence, only: I mean what I said, she has gone with Mr. Lovett. She had no intention of it till she saw him on the steps of the hotel, and then she suddenly discovered she had something to do in Rille that could not possibly be delayed. Dear, dear! I am quite sick and tired of her devices.'

'She wanted to get out of St. Pucelle on "pig-killing day," I suppose, Mrs. Carolus. Tessie tells me all decent people leave the town to-day if they can. Do you not hear the far-off squeaks of the poor porkers as we sit here? It must be horrible to be in the midst of them.'

Mrs. Carolus grew quite testy over my frivolity.

'Nonsense, Miss Marsh! You must be trying to take advantage of my credulity. But if you think it delicate or proper that an unmarried lady should ask for, and accept, the chaperonage of one gentleman in order to run of and see another, I cannot view it in the same light.'

'Oh, there is another gentleman in the wind, is there? That is lucky for Miss Markham, for I really do not think it is of any use trying her chances with Mr. Lovett.'

'Of course there is another! That is the indelicate part of it. The young man I once mentioned to you, Miss Marsh, as having been rather taken with the pretty Miss Lovett, is staying in Rille just now, and the way in which that woman goes on with him is disgusting—positively disgusting. If you saw them together you'd really say she was ready to jump down his throat. And she is constantly writing to him, too.'

'Perhaps there is a mutual understanding between them,' I suggested.

'Dear me, no! she goes on in the same way with everybody. I am sure, the scenes that have taken place between her and that young Thrale are a perfect scandal, and enough to ruin the reputation of any house. I have blushed scarlet, and so has my Willie, only to hear the things she says to him.'

'She has never struck me as being particularly refined or reticent, either in her manners or conversation.'

'Oh, my dear! you have not heard half of it! She tells such stories, sometimes, as would make your hair stand on end. And doubtless a good deal more has reached Mrs. Thrale's ears than she chooses to acknowledge, and that is the reason of her letter to me.'

'Mrs. Thrale! What, Arthur Thrale's mother? Has she written to you?'

'Didn't I tell you? Why, that's the real reason Sophy has gone off to Rille. She is so afraid of the inquiries that may ensue. This morning, my dear, I received a letter from Mrs. Thrale, whom I've never seen in the course of my life, begging me to look after her son, whom she has heard is very intimate with my friends and myself, and whom she avers has lost any amount of money since he has been in St. Pucelle.'

'*How* has he lost it?' I demanded eagerly.

'Ah, that's the question! How has it gone? The lad is staying at the same hotel as we are, at the instigation of Miss Markham, who persuaded him to follow us here, but, excepting out of doors, Willie and I see very little of him. However, Sophy and he have been *always* together—morning, noon, and night, uphill and downhill; and I, of course, have had no right to interfere. But one thing I *know*, and that is, that young Thrale has given her the most beautiful presents; and presents, Miss Marsh, are not bought for nothing.'

'No, indeed! But he must have been very extravagant to make his mother write of him as she has done.'

'She says he has lost or parted with hundreds of pounds since he has been in St. Pucelle, and entreats me to reason with him on his folly, and to persuade him. if possible, to return home to his parents. But I have no control over the young man's actions. And how can he have parted with his money except by spending it on that woman? He knows no one here but ourselves and Mr. Lovett, and, I think, that elegant-looking foreign baron who lives up in the forest. Sophia Markham would have tried to get up a flirtation with *him* also, if she could have managed to speak French well enough, but, notwithstanding her boasting, she is a poor hand at it if she has to say anything out of the common way.'

'It would have been of little use to her if she had been successful,' I said, smiling, 'for the Baron de Nesselrode is too poor to make presents to any one.'

'Her face, when I taxed her with ruining Arthur Thrale, was a perfect study, and I feel almost sure she has done more than take presents from him. She ran upstairs and put on her hat at once, and not a minute afterwards I heard she was going to Rille. To see the other one, of course, and try what she can do now with him. For it is only an excuse, saying she wants to buy something, my dear, for we had already planned to go over in a party to Rille, to-morrow morning.'

'Do you still intend to go, Mrs. Carolus? and if so, will you execute a commission for me?' I asked.

'Certainly, Miss Marsh! Anything that I can do for you. What is it that you require?'

'Next Tuesday will be Ange's birthday, and I wish to give her a pair of silver earrings to match the cross she usually wears. I don't want to spare any expense, Mrs. Carolus. I should like them to be as good and pretty as herself.'

But there I stopped, remembering that Mr. Lovett would not be home before the morning, and doubtful whether I should have mentioned the earrings to Mrs. Carolus before I had the money to give her to pay for them.

'I will buy you, then, the handsomest and strongest that I can procure in Rille, Miss Marsh.'

'No, Mrs. Carolus! Please do not. I forgot when I spoke just now that I shall not have my allowance till after Mr. Lovett returns to-morrow.'

'Oh, indeed! He stays over the night, then. But that is no obstacle, Miss Marsh. I will purchase the earrings, and you can repay me at any time.'

'Thank you so much! You are very kind,' I answered; but as the Caroluses were rich people, and I felt certain of paying the money in a day or two, I did not feel the obligation to be a weighty one. But it entailed my having to listen for another half-hour, at least, to the scandal Mrs. Carolus chose to retail me, until, to my infinite relief, I spied Tessie and Ange coming over the hill to put an end to the conversation.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SECRET.

THERE was something mysterious about Mr. Lovett's manner and behaviour after he returned from that visit to Rille, which I could not account for. In the first place, he was in the very best and highest of spirits, and the most extravagant dinners appeared upon the table for two days in consequence, whilst he lavished more than his usual affection and caresses upon his daughters and myself. Then, there seemed to be preparations going on for some great event.

A peasant woman was hired to clean all the upper part of the house, and for forty-eight hours remained on her knees in an attitude of adoration, scrubbing vigorously at the boards, whilst Madame Marmoret stood over her and shrieked that she was a pig and a fool not to work faster. A spare chamber that had possessed no furniture of its own except a bedstead, suddenly became habitable, by reason of articles being secretly abstracted from our rooms to repair its deficiencies.

I know that I missed a chair, a side-table and a water-bottle and tumbler, but no cross-questioning of Madame Marmoret ever elicited the fact that she had had any hand in their removal.

The next thing that happened was that Tessie and Ange were taken into their father's confidence, and were evidently much gratified by what he told them. Tessie, who was always cheerful but seldom merry, went about the house singing like a bird, whilst she helped Madame Marmoret to starch and iron muslin curtains and draperies; and Ange, whose happy face I had never yet seen clouded, seemed bursting with the weight of some pleasant secret which she had the greatest difficulty in preventing her lips from disclosing. A dozen times a day she threw her arms around me, exclaiming:

'Oh, Hilda! I *am* so happy!'

But when I asked her why, her rosy mouth was resolutely closed, and she said I should know it all soon, and I must be patient and wait. So I was patient, concluding that Mr. Lovett had received some good news of a private nature, in which none but his daughters had any right to share. A remark or two dropped by Tessie, relative to a change and a stroke of good-fortune, confirmed me in this opinion. I thought that his visit to Rille might have led to an interview with some clerical grandee, and the result was, the prospect of leaving St. Pucelle for a living of greater value.

I could not tell why, but as I dwelt on this idea, it gave me pain. I had already learned to love the quaint little town and its surroundings, and the thought of new scenes and faces disquieted me.

Meanwhile, the silver earrings arrived. Mrs. Carolus had executed my commission with more taste than I had given her credit for, and the massive Normandy work of which they were composed was the handsomest thing of its kind I had ever seen. My only trouble was that I had not yet received the money wherewith to pay for them. Mr. Lovett had been so exceedingly kind and generous in his offer to me on the occasion of my speaking of my allowance, that I did not like to worry him on the subject again so soon, especially as his mind seemed full of more important matters. Besides, he would be likely to inquire for what I required the money, and find fault with me for spending too much upon his little maid.

The only resource left to me, therefore, was to tell the truth to Mrs. Carolus, and ask her for a few days' grace, which I did by letter, as St. Pucelle was visited by a succession of showers about that time, and we were almost kept prisoners to the house.

At last Ange's birthday—her *jour de fête* as she called it—arrived, and the little maid completed her eighteenth year. I was waked early in the morning by a commotion of voices chattering in the Wallon *patois* beneath my window, and getting up to see what was the matter, my eyes encountered a score or two of grinning faces upturned to mine, the owners of which held large bouquets of flowers in their hands. But the disappointment visible as soon as I appeared proved it was not me for whom they had assembled.

'*Ce n'est pas la petite Ange!*' they said to one another, shaking their heads the while. In another minute the casement next to mine was thrown open, and I knew that Ange's sweet face was framed in it, by the roar of delight with which she was received. '*Bon jour, ma'm'sel!*' '*Bonheur, ma'm'sel!*' '*Que le bon Dieu te bénisse, petite Ange!*' resounded from every side, whilst the bunches of flowers were held up simultaneously, till they looked like a forest of blossom.

'I will be with you directly, dear friends,' exclaimed Ange, in their own *patois*; and the next moment I saw her in the very midst of them, kissing the women, shaking hands with the men, and laughing and crying by turns, as she attempted to carry in her apron one half the flowers they had brought her.

One old woman went down on her knees in the middle of the road and kissed the child's feet.

'She saved my boy's life! He would have died if she had not helped to nurse him with me,' she said, with the tears running down her yellow, withered cheeks.

In her hands she held up a common wooden chaplet, black with dirt and age.

'See, *petite* Ange,' she continued, 'it is all I have to bring you. It is not much, but my poor daughter died with it in her hand, praying the good God to bless all His saints upon earth. And you are one of them; and this chaplet must surely bring a blessing upon you.'

Amidst the crowd I distinguished Mère Fromard, the woman who had addressed me by the Calvary during the first week of my sojourn in St. Pucelle.

'I would have brought the best offering of them all, ma'm'selle,' she said, 'but you know the reason that prevents me!'

Ange went up to her and touched her forehead with her lips.

'All will come right in time, Mère Fromard,' she answered cheerfully. 'Trust to God! And how is your husband this morning?'

The woman gave some ordinary reply, and moved away in the crowd; but the look she directed at Ange was a strange mixture of surprise, incredulity and despair.

'It is not *her* fault!' I heard her mutter, as she fell back to give place to some one else.

When we descended to the *salle* for breakfast, we found it transformed into a perfect bower of sweets. Flowers bloomed upon the mantelpiece, the buffet and the floor, whilst in the centre of the table was a magnificent nosegay of every coloured rose, which had come from the château for Mademoiselle Ange, with the compliments of Monsieur le Baron. And amidst them all moved the little maid, flushed like the very heart of a rose herself, with unalloyed happiness beaming in her eyes and irradiating every feature of her expressive face.

'Oh, papa!' she exclaimed, when at last her excitement had somewhat subsided, and we persuaded her to sit down to her meal. 'I feel as if this day was to be the commencement of a new life for me!'

Our little offerings had already been presented and duly thanked for. Tessie's new muslin apron adorned her slender waist; at her right hand lay a book her father had bought for her in Rille, and my silver earrings flashed and sparkled in her ears.

To say that Ange was pleased with my thought of her is to say too little. She was a true woman, and delighted in the adornment of her beauty as she delighted in flowers and birds and children and all the other gifts of heaven. She had coloured to her very eyes with innocent pleasure when I first put the ornaments in her hand, and had stood for ten minutes before the glass, shaking and nodding her graceful little head, in order to see them sparkle.

Mr. Lovett, too, whose censure for extravagance I had feared, seemed almost as gratified as the child herself at the manner in which the dangling silver things became her, and thanked me more than once for giving her so handsome a present, though he never thought of asking me how I had been able to pay the sum they had cost. Tessie alone appeared to be annoyed at my disregarding her advice, and indifferent to her sister's joy in her new possessions. Was she jealous, I thought, because I was in a position to make Ange a more valuable gift than herself? Surely Tessie, with her sweet good-nature and noble heart, could never stoop to the indulgence of so mean a feeling as that? Yet she left me quite unable otherwise to account for her silence and grave looks whenever the silver earrings were brought beneath her notice.

The post only arrived once a day at St. Pucelle, and whilst we were in the middle of breakfast, Monsieur le Facteur, as Madame Marmoret politely designated him, rapped sharply with his knuckles on the window-shutter and delivered a letter to Ange through the open casement.

It was for Mr. Lovett, and evidently contained agreeable news, for as he read it he exclaimed : 'Look here, girls !' which made Tessie and Ange fly to peruse its contents over their father's shoulder, when all three faces beamed with pleasure and anticipation.

'On your birthday, too, Ange ! This is quite a coincidence,' said my guardian presently ; 'and we must have a little fête in consequence. My dear Hilda, it is time I told you——'

'No, no, papa !' cried Ange, clapping her hand before his mouth. 'Don't tell her yet. Let it be a surprise. It will be such a tremendous one ! and you will spoil it all if you say a word beforehand.'

'Don't make it too great a surprise, my little maid, or it may have a serious effect upon poor Hilda.'

'Oh, papa, how funny you are ! As if anything *nice* could hurt one ! And Tessie and I have agreed that this change is to be a very, *very* nice one indeed !'

'If it is the solution of the mystery that has occupied you all for the last few days,' I interposed, 'you need not be afraid of the *dénouement* proving fatal to me, for I have all but guessed it for myself.'

'What is it then, Hilda?' demanded Ange.

'First, it has something to do with a change in the establishment.

'That is right!'

'And it grew out of your father's visit to Rille last week.'

'Right again! I believe Tessie has been telling you.'

'I have done no such thing!' retorted her sister, indignantly. 'Did we not promise papa to say nothing till it was certain?'

'I can vouch for my knowledge being the result of my own sharpness only,' I said; 'so you must blame no one else, Ange!'

'Very well. What more has your sharpness discovered?'

'That there is a gentleman connected with this change.'

'She *does* know it!' ejaculated Ange, with a very suspicious expression of countenance. 'You must have overheard us talking of it, Hilda.'

'With my ear to the keyhole! No, Ange dear, that is not my usual method of gaining information. Well, then, for a final guess! This change will take you away from St. Pucelle.'

'Take *me* away, do you mean? or take us *all* away?'

'All, of course—bag and baggage—and give you a new home somewhere else.'

'Oh no; that's wrong!' said Ange, shaking her head determinately—'*quite* wrong!'

'What! Shall you stay in St. Pucelle?'

'Of course! Where else should we go? What would papa do without his living?'

'Oh, then I'm out altogether, and my other guesses go for nothing. The gentleman and the change that is connected with your father's visit to Rille remain unfathomable mysteries to me. I see I have been on a wrong tack.'

'I'm *so* glad!' cried Ange, clapping her hands. 'Now, as a punishment for daring to guess at all, you shall not hear a single word of the wonderful change until it actually takes place. Do you understand, Hilda?'

'Perfectly! and as it is your *jour de fête*, I suppose you are to be allowed to tyrannise over your betters with impunity. I only hope, when the revelation comes, that it will not be so startling as to prevent my surviving it.'

Mr. Lovett had been laughing heartily all through this little episode. He seemed perfectly to enter into his daughters' delight at teasing me about their wonderful secret, at which Tessie proved to be as good as her sister; and I think it would have been difficult to find more cheerful faces in St. Pucelle than rose from our breakfast-table that morning.

Naturally I suffered a great deal during the remainder of that day from the hands of both my young friends. They were running about the house like busy bees all the morning, helping in the kitchen and the bedchambers; but whenever they crossed my path, they seized the opportunity to taunt me with my ignorance concerning their secret.

I am sure, if bright-haired Ange regretted once during those few hours that she had vowed her lips should remain sealed until the revelation of the household mystery was close at hand, she must have regretted it fifty times; but she made up for her self-imposed reticence by chattering without ceasing to Madame Marmoret in the Wallon dialect. That amiable individual appeared to accept the impending change with wonderful tranquillity, although it was certainly putting her to a great deal of extra trouble. I did, indeed, once overhear her grumbling that she hoped things might turn out as they expected : that, for her own part, she had lost hope altogether, and never anticipated any better lot than to end her days in the poorhouse.

I saw Tessie, on that occasion, leave the work on which she was engaged, and walking up to the cross-grained old servant, put her arms about her neck and beg her to be patient.

Why was Tessie always the comforter, I thought, when Madame Marmoret's ebullitions of temper had reached their culminating point? Ange, who was all love and pity for the poor, and whom Madame had reared from an infant—Ange, I should have imagined, would have been the readier of the two to soothe and console her.

But the little maid, notwithstanding her universal charity abroad, never seemed to realise that anyone within the house could stand in need of consolation. They lived under the same roof as her father—that father whom she credited with being the best, most lovable, most honourable, and most holy creature upon earth : and what could they possibly want more?

I believe that is really the way in which innocent Ange thought of us all. I have heard her say that Tessie and she were sure to be married some day, because if men did not wish to marry them for their own sakes, they would do so for the glory of being able to call Mr. Lovett by the name of 'father.' And this without a shade of coquetry or self-consciousness passing over the unclouded mirror of her lovely face.

The remainder of the *jour de fête* passed very quietly; but I could see, as the afternoon waned, that the portentous secret was growing too big to be held much longer in the 'durance vile' of silence. Even a visit from the Abbé Morteville (one of the pleasantest and most intellectual of our acquaintances), with a beautiful little statuette, which he had had sent all the way from Paris to place on Ange's mantelpiece, could not do more than engage her attention for the few minutes that it endured.

The dinner-table, which was not usually laid in the *salle* till six o'clock, was ready that day by five. A snow-white cloth adorned the board, whilst at the four corners were placed, alternately, bowls of whipped cream and custard, and dishes of ripe fruit and *gaufres*, made by Tessie's own hands. In the centre of the table bloomed the Baron's beautiful roses; anyone could see it was a *fête*-day, by the unusual grandeur of the preparations. The girls had not changed their black serge dresses—indeed, I knew by that time that they had no others to change; and I often wondered on what they spent the allowance which their father had told me he paid them quarterly—but they wore white muslin aprons and kerchiefs; and Ange had a bunch of damask roses glowing in her bosom. I remember thinking, as I saw her slender figure darting from room to room that day, that I had never seen her look so charmingly youthful and pretty before.

At last the discordant voice of the cowhorn, by which the diligence usually heralded its approach from Artois, was heard winding along the valley.

'Papa, papa!' exclaimed Ange, all excitement as she rushed about to get his hat and stick, 'do you not hear old François's horn? Run along quick, or you will be a great deal too late! You know how he always whips up his poor little mules, as soon as he has turned the corner of the road, to pretend they have been racing all the way from Artois! And Madame has everything ready in the kitchen—only waiting to be dished up on your return. Such dear little ortolans, papa! Monsieur de Nesselrode sent them down this afternoon for you, with his compliments; and Madame has the most delicious secret way of dressing them you ever knew! But if you don't make haste——'

'And how am I to make haste, you little puss, if you cling to me after this fashion? Give me my stick and let me go! I shall be back again within the next ten minutes.'

'And *now* for the secret!' cried Ange, as she jumped upon my lap, and clasped her arms round my neck. '*Now*, Hilda, you must be told! It is coming very, very close, and in a few minutes you will know all.'

'What a portentous expression!' I said, laughing. 'It is like the *dénouement* of one of Mrs. Radcliffe's novels. I suppose I may conclude one thing, however, Ange, and that is, that the secret is coming in the diligence from Artois.'

'Yes, yes! it is!'

'And that it wears trousers!'

'Yes, yes! Hilda, you are very clever. You always guess right.'

'But *who* is this mysterious stranger, then? and why have you kept me in the dark about him so long?'

'Because we were not quite sure if it would come to pass,' said Tessie, in her soft voice; 'you see, Hilda, when papa went to Rille last week, he met a gentleman whom we——'

'Oh, Tessie! do let me tell her!' pleaded Ange, after which they continued to interrupt each other, much in this fashion: 'Yes, he met a gentleman who wanted to come here for a few months——'

'To shoot in the forest, you know——'

'Yes! to shoot or to fish or to do anything he liked, but he couldn't get rooms in the hotel——'

'Well, he could have got rooms, Ange, but they were not so nice as he desired——'

'Anyway, papa asked him to come and stay with us—but he wouldn't hear of it——'

'Knowing that we are not rich, you understand, Hilda——'

'But he said if papa would let him board with us, he would come for three months certain——'

'And perhaps longer, as he may stay over the winter——'

'If he likes the shooting he will: and he is going to pay us such a lot of money——'

'Hush, Ange! I don't think papa would like you to tell that part of it.'

'Why not? He couldn't come here without he did pay—and papa would not have accepted his offer if it had been too much.'

'Certainly not! still, I think it would be fairer to him, as well as papa, to let that matter rest between themselves.'

'You are quite right, Tessie,' I interposed, 'and I would rather not hear any more about the financial part of the arrangement.'

'Of course it is a good thing for us any way, Hilda. You will understand that; and we hope it will be agreeable, too. That is why we have all looked so pleased the last few days.'

'It *must* be agreeable,' said Ange, with a heightened colour, 'because papa says it will. And we thought he wouldn't come till next week, until the letter arrived for papa this morning, and——'

'Hullo, hullo! Who is that taking my name in vain?' exclaimed Mr. Lovett, from the open doorway; and Ange leapt off my lap as if she had been shot, and we all three rose to our feet to receive the expected stranger. I saw Tessie move forward first, and heard her utter a few shy words of welcome, but Ange had to be dragged to the front by her father, before she could be induced to contribute her share to our hospitable greeting. Then Mr. Lovett mentioned my name as that of his adopted daughter, Hilda Marsh, and I left the vine-covered embrasure of the window in which I had hitherto concealed myself, to encounter—*Cave Charteris!*

CHAPTER XIV.

THE DÉNOUEMENT.

I AM quite unable to remember what I said, or did, in the first shock of meeting him again. His presence in St. Pucelle was so utterly sudden and unexpected to me, that I should not have felt greater surprise if my dead mother had stood before me; and I do not think that, for the first few minutes, I at all believed or realised that I was face to face with the man who had embittered so large a portion of my life.

I suppose I said something, and held out my hand to him, because he seized it eagerly, and appeared delighted at the recognition.

'*Hilda!* Miss Marsh! Is it possible? Who on earth would ever have dreamed of meeting you here?'

The astonishment of my friends at his evident knowledge of me, luckily prevented my having any occasion to answer his remark.

'My dear Mr. Charteris,' said Mr. Lovett, 'you have taken us all aback. Do you mean to tell me that you have met Hilda before?'

'Have I *not* met Hilda before?' he echoed, in the old joyous tone that sent a shiver through my heart. 'Ask her yourself if you don't believe me! Why, we were the very best of friends some few years ago, when I was an idle young fellow, loafing half my time away down at their pretty little place in Norwood. By the way, Miss Marsh, I hope that your mother is perfectly well.'

At this careless question, which told me so cruelly how little interest I and my affairs had held for him since our parting, I raised my eyes and looked in Cave Charteris's face. Something in their expression, I suppose, added to my black dress, revealed the truth to him, for though Tessie interposed with a quick '*Hush!*' it was almost drowned in his apology.

'I beg your pardon *so* much! I am afraid I have made a great mistake, but it is so long since we met, you see; and I have been out of the world lately, and the reach of news.'

'It is no matter,' I uttered faintly, as I turned to Mr. Lovett. The old man folded me in his arms as though I had really been his daughter.

'Hilda and I have had a mutual misfortune lately, Mr. Charteris,' he explained. 'She has lost the best of mothers, and I one whom, though I had never had the pleasure of meeting, I reckoned amongst the most valued of my friends. Hilda's father and myself were sworn chums in the old college days, and, after his lamented death, there was nothing to which I looked forward in the future with so much pleasure as the hope that I might meet and be of service to his widow and child. However, there is a Power above that disposes such things for us, and that is the reason that you find Hilda here, living in my house, and second only to my own daughters in my affection and esteem. Go, my dear !' he added kindly to me, 'and tell Madame that we are ready for our dinner ! I will take Mr. Charteris meanwhile to his room, and when we meet again, I trust we shall all feel more at ease than we do at present.'

I was so grateful to my guardian for dismissing me at that moment, that I fled to the presence of Madame Marmoret as if she had been an angel of light instead of very much the reverse. Her sharp eyes detected my agitation in a moment.

'*Eh bien !*' she exclaimed, as she fixed those piercing black orbs upon my countenance. 'And if they *do* want their dinner, is that any reason you should be as white as a peeled turnip ? Mamselle Ange has been the colour of a carrot all day, and now you have thought fit to do the other thing ! What does it all mean ? Young men were not so scarce with me, when *I* was a girl, that they caused such a commotion as all that comes to ; and if this stranger is to set the whole house topsy-turvy, why, the sooner he goes back to wherever he came from, the better ; that's what *I* say !'

'Oh, hush, Madame ! He may hear you.'

'And what if he should ?' she exclaimed, raising her voice from sheer obstinacy, until it reached every corner of the house. 'I say nothing I am ashamed of ; but I don't judge people before I see them, as you foolish young creatures do! I take no one on trust. I want to see my money before I give over my goods; and so I say, let him that pays quickest be soonest served.'

Mr. Lovett had conducted Mr. Charteris upstairs by a more imposing route than that which led through the kitchen, although we seldom used it, because it entailed going through the garden. But I was very glad he had adopted it this evening, since it permitted me to reach my own room without encountering them again.

As I entered it I drew myself up firmly, and knew that I must be brave, at least for the next few hours. I dared not stay to think: the opportunity had not yet arrived for the indulgence of such a luxury.

All I had to do was to brace my nerves to meet Cave Charteris in the careless forgetful spirit in which he had evidently met me, and to ignore for the time being that we had ever dreamt of becoming more to one another than we were that night. I admired the coolness with which he had stood the shock of meeting me; at that moment I could not believe that his affected nonchalance was *real*—and I would imitate it to the best of my ability. So, in a few minutes, I descended to the *salle* again, looking as much as possible like my usual self! I found the girls alone there, the gentlemen not having yet returned.

'What do you think of him?' asked Tessie eagerly, as I entered. 'Do you not find him very handsome and distinguished-looking! He appears a true Englishman to me, with his fair yellowish hair and those very blue eyes!'

'*Bah!*' exclaimed Madame Marmoret, who had just brought in a dish of trout and laid it on the table. 'What is the good of an

Englishman over another man, except that he has more money and is a greater fool, so that he parts with it easier.'

'You are not very complimentary, Madame,' said Ange. 'You seem to forget that we are English.'

'I wish I could, *petite* Ange! 'tis the worst part about you—except the want of money.'

'You are always talking about money, Madame. Monsieur l'Abbé would tell you, you should not think so much about it. I am sure we have as much as we require.'

'That is as it may be!' grumbled Madame, 'but other people have not as much as *they* require, perhaps—*voyez?* Mère Fromard could tell you a different story if you were to ask her.'

'Madame!' interposed Tessie, in a tone of remonstrance, which sent the servant muttering out of the *salle*.

'You are a greedy old pig!' called out Ange playfully after her, but Tessie seemed to be afraid of what the pleasantry might lead to, for she drew the little maid to one side and bade her be silent.

When first we sat down to dinner, Cave Charteris appeared to be so much overcome by the news he had heard, as to be rendered almost silent. Every moment or so, I detected him glancing furtively at my mourning dress and pallid features, and he answered the questions addressed to him by Mr. Lovett in monosyllables. I suppose he felt sorry that he had wounded my feelings, and the occasion of his doing so had revived some remembrance of the many little kindnesses he had received at the hands of my dear mother when she had imagined she was showing an interest in the affairs of the man who was to become her son-in-law. However, under the influence of the good dinner that Madame had prepared for us, and the good wine which had suddenly made its appearance on the table—heaven alone knows from where, for these unusual luxuries had a habit of springing into existence with us as unexpectedly as if they had been shot up through a trap-door at a stage banquet—Mr. Charteris soon shook off his temporary embarrassment, and became the most talkative of the company. Of course he was informed of the importance of the day, and insisted upon our drinking the little maid's health with three times three. Strange to say, I joined in these birthday congratulations almost as readily as if nothing had occurred to disturb the tranquillity of the morning. If I were a little paler and more silent than usual, the Lovetts attributed it to the suddenness with which I had encountered my mother's friend, and Mr. Charteris had no notion that I had been otherwise since I had lost her.

When conversation had been restored amongst us, he addressed the greater part of his to myself, taking care, however, not to make the slightest allusion to the old days at Norwood.

'I should think that seeing me walk in here, Miss Marsh' (I perceived, with gratitude, that he had quite dropped his old familiar habit of calling me 'Hilda'), 'must have been almost as great a surprise to you as meeting you was to me. And it all came about by the most remarkable coincidence possible. Have you told Miss Marsh where you met me?' he added, turning to Mr. Lovett.

'I have not. I wish now that I had, but my girls there wanted to astonish her with the appearance of a young man (young men being a rarity in St. Pucelle), and kept your identity a dead secret until you stood upon the very threshold.'

'Ah! just so. Well, Miss Marsh, I had been staying in Paris for the last three months, and had promised my uncle, Sir John Stephenson, to visit his son at Rille before I returned home again.'

'Sir John Stephenson's son! What, Fred Stephenson?' I exclaimed, roused into interest.

'Yes; do you know them? By Jove! now you mention it, I remember Fred telling me he had crossed to Antwerp after the summer holidays with a Miss Marsh, who was going to Artois. And it never struck me for a moment that it could be you. How strangely things do turn out! Fancy! the very name itself not arousing my curiosity.'

'I see nothing strange in it. It is so many years since we met.'

'It is indeed. Let me see, how many—four, five, six?'

'Five.'

'Five years ago. By Jove! so it is. I was a nice article at that time, I dare say; I hope you will find me improved now, Miss Marsh. However, to return to my story: it was not the first visit I had paid to Rille, for I was over there last autumn, when I had the pleasure of making the acquaintance of Mr. Lovett and his daughters.'

'On the occasion of the Bishop of Otaheite holding a confirmation there,' interposed Mr. Lovett, 'Tessie and Ange were both confirmed. They had not had an opportunity of being so before, as, when the last Protestant bishop visited Rille, Ange was too young and Tessie had the measles. Young Stephenson was confirmed too, if I remember rightly. A nice-looking lad with fair hair.'

'Yes, that is he! I am going to ask you by-and-by, Mr. Lovett, if I may have him over here for a day's shooting. I promised him a holiday, and my coming to St. Pucelle sooner than I intended cut him out of it.'

'Certainly! We shall be delighted to see your cousin, or any friends of yours, Mr. Charteris.'

'Thanks, so much! Well, Miss Marsh, where was I?'

'I am not quite sure,' I answered slowly.

'You were going to tell us how it came to pass that you met papa again,' said Ange, blushing violently at the sound of her own voice.

I saw Cave Charteris's eyes rest on her admiringly, and the thought of what Mrs. Carolus had told me just flashed across my mind and made me turn a little more sick than I was before. Only for a moment, though; the next I knew that nothing could make any difference to the relations in which he and I now stood to one another. I am not a woman hard of belief, but where I have been once deceived, I never trust again. Cave Charteris's pleasant voice roused me from my reverie.

'Ah! just so. Thank you, Miss Lovett, for the reminder. Whatever else I may forget, you may rest assured I shall never forget the occasion of my first visit to Rille! Well, there I was stranded last week in one of my very worst humours—and when you have seen me in one of my very worst humours, I do not think you will ever wish for the pleasure again. I have a shocking bad temper, Miss Lovett!'

He said 'Miss Lovett,' but he meant Ange; and the little maid laughed softly to herself in answer. I am quite sure she did not believe him.

'I had given up my rooms in Paris, and gone to Rille for a few days *en route* to my own "diggings." And there I received a letter to say that scarlet-fever had broken out at home, and I must not think of crossing till the doctor said it would be safe for me to do so.'

'Oh dear! how sad!' exclaimed Tessie, sympathetically.

She was our only spokeswoman.

'Very sad! isn't it? But it would be foolish of me to go, especially as they don't want me. Well, just as I was swearing at this—I beg your pardon, ladies, I mean just as I was reviling my ill-luck—in walks your good father there, to whom I confide my difficulty, telling him, at the same time, that if I can secure comfortable quarters at St. Pucelle, I think of taking up my abode there for a short time, in order to have some forest shooting. Now you can guess all the rest. Mr. Lovett, with his usual benevolence, offers me the shelter of his roof for as long as I can behave myself, and his friend the Baron de Nesselrode has kindly volunteered to be my guide through the Piron. What a number of accidents, all coming together, conduce to this pleasant meeting! Well, I suppose it *was* to be, Miss Marsh, and I, for one, have every reason to congratulate myself that it has occurred.'

I tried to say that it pleased me also, though the lie left my faltering tongue but tamely.

'You have an engagement with De Nesselrode to-morrow morning, I believe?' remarked Mr. Lovett.

'Yes; that is the reason of my sudden appearance here. He wrote me word that they have got up a boar-hunt in the forest for the day after to-morrow, and I was anxious to see what sort of a mount I could get in St. Pucelle. I do not wish to send to Rille or Brussels, unless it is absolutely necessary. Are there any horses to be hired about here?'

'None to be hired, but plenty to be bought.'

'It makes no difference to me; indeed, I would prefer to purchase if I can get a place to keep the animal in.'

'We have an excellent stable and cow-shed adjoining the house, which are both at your service, being, unfortunately for us, empty.'

'That is settled, then; and will suit me far better than the hiring system. If I remain here, as I hope to do, for a few months, I should not care to be riding a different animal every day.'

'And the horse you will purchase here will serve your purpose better than any town-bred animal. It takes a stout-hearted little beast, I can assure you, not to turn tail in forest-shooting. But here it seems bred in their bone. Even our sheep-dogs have wolf-blood in them, and will attack anything.'

'I anticipate any amount of pleasure in the forest,' said Mr. Charteris; 'and if your friend Monsieur de Nesselrode is half as courteous as his letters, I am sure we shall get on well together.'

'He is a thoroughbred gentleman,' replied my guardian; 'one of the *ancienne noblesse*, who are so fast dying out of France. He is expatriated for the present—the Château des Roses having been one of the shooting-boxes of the family—but when he comes into his own again, there will not be a finer courtier throughout the length and breadth of the land.'

'So Miss Markham has given me to understand. She has often mentioned the Baron de Nesselrode to me.'

'Oh! do you know Sophy Markham?' cried Ange, with a childish giggle.

Cave Charteris took her cue at once.

'Who *doesn't* know her?' he answered, laughing. 'She is ubiquitous, and appears to be an institution wherever I go. I have met her at Paris, in Italy, Switzerland and Germany; at Brussels and Rille, and now I find her settled in St. Pucelle. I begin to believe I am never to be rid of Miss Sophy Markham, and if I crossed to Dover to-morrow, I should expect to see her face hanging over the rails of the landing-stage to welcome me home.'

They all laughed heartily at that, and Tessie said slyly

'Do you not admire her, then?'

'Come, come, my girl! no scandal,' interposed Mr. Lovett, quickly.

'Ah, papa! I forgot you were one of the followers in her train.'

'I am sure papa is no such thing,' said Ange, indignantly. '*She* follows papa, you mean!'

'Here, Charteris! let us get out of this,' exclaimed her father, rising from table. 'You see what you have to expect from putting your character in the hands of a couple of little scandal-mongers like these. If you will not take any more wine for the present, we will stroll down the town and speak to Jacques Despard about the horses. I know he has several nice colts for sale, and if you are anything of a horseman, you may like the mettle of a young, untrained animal. De Nesselrode will be up here by-and-by, I have no doubt, when I shall have the pleasure of making you personally acquainted. Tessie, my dear, should the Baron arrive before I return, tell him to make himself *chez lui* till I come. Now, Charteris.'

And, with a bow that included us all three from the latter, and a nod from Mr. Lovett, the two gentlemen took their way down the street of St. Pucelle.

Oh, how I longed to go to bed and bury my bursting brain in the feather pillows; to find myself quite, *quite* alone in the friendly darkness, and with the key in my door turned against all intruders!

My head ached from repressed thought; my heart was sick and trembling; I felt really ill for want of giving vent to my emotion: yet, so strong are the influences of custom and society, that I dared not tell the girls I needed rest. On the contrary, I eagerly denied their assertion that the sudden appearance of Mr. Charteris had upset me, and disdained all need of the affectionate sympathy they tendered me in consequence.

'My dear children,' I said impatiently, 'I assure you you are mistaken. I am not half such a fool as I look. I confess it startled me to see Mr. Charteris walk into the room, because, for aught I knew to the contrary, the man might have been dead and buried by this time; but that fact alone will tell you that we could not have been very intimate friends in the olden days.'

'Still, I suppose you know *something* about him?' persisted Ange.

'How do you mean "*something about him*"?'

'Why, about his family, and so forth.'

'Indeed, I do not. I never paid a single visit to his family—I believe they are Northampton people!'

'Norfolk, I think,' put in Ange, timidly; 'at least he said so when we first saw him at Rille.'

'Oh, indeed! then I dare say you know a great deal more about him than I do. The fact is, Tessie,' I continued, longing to have the explanation over once and for ever, 'Mr. Charteris was introduced to us, many years ago, by an old friend of my dear mother's. He was hanging about town then, doing nothing, I fancy—any way, he used often to run down to Norwood to see us, as you have heard him say, and—and—we were rather intimate for a few months—that is, until his father sent him to travel on the Continent, since which I have heard nothing of him until we met to-day.'

'You knew none of his sisters or brothers, then—nor his parents?'

'I knew none of the family but himself. I think he used to speak to me of his sisters, but I forget how many there were.'

'He has only one sister now,' said Ange, again. 'I wonder if it is she who has the scarlet-fever.'

'Most likely! Have you heard what profession he is in?'

'I do not think he has any,' replied Tessie. 'He seems to be a man of independent property! Did you hear him say that it made no difference to him if he bought a horse or hired one.'

'Yes; I suppose, then, he must have come into some money. He was not rich when we knew him. I remember that! He was to have read for the law, and my dear mother used to say—she said, I remember—I can recall her saying——' But no! put it which way I would, that sentence utterly refused to come to the birth. I had harped, unwittingly, on a string too nearly connected with my dead hope, and the discovery broke me down. 'Oh, mother! mother!' I cried aloud, as I put my head in Tessie's lap and sobbed without restraint. Of course they attributed it to the associations which the presence of their guest had recalled to my mind, and they were as tender and sympathetic with my distress as though they had been to blame for it.

'I am so sorry we kept it a secret from you, dear Hilda,' they exclaimed simultaneously; 'it was such a silly thing to do:

but we had not the slightest conception that you had met him before, and under such happier circumstances. Do forgive us, Hilda! You will make us so very miserable if we think we have made you so.'

I assured them solemnly, as I rose and dried my eyes, that the girlish trick they had played upon me had nothing to do with my present state of mind. I should have felt the rencontre just as much I said, and truly, had I been prepared for it weeks beforehand; and I only required a few hours by myself to subdue the unusual emotion which old memories had raised in me. My answer had just the effect I desired.

'Do go to bed, then, dear Hilda,' urged Tessie, 'and sleep off the remembrance of this unhappy evening. I am sure you will like Mr. Charteris very much when you come to speak to him more freely, and, perhaps, in a few days, you will congratulate yourself that you have met him again.

How little I thought, as I dragged myself up to my room, that her surmise would prove true.

CHAPTER XV.

CURED.

THE chief feeling that I experienced when I came to review the events of that evening, was, that my unexpected encounter with Cave Charteris seemed to have dragged my mother out of her grave again. Until that moment I had believed that, little by little, I was learning to bear my great loss with hope and patience, if not with cheerful resignation. I had begun to think of my darling as in another and better world than this—if not actually in heaven, at least among the redeemed, willing to wait the moment of her perfection, and entirely separated from all earthly pain and trouble.

I had commenced to lose sense of the waking nightmare that had haunted me for so many weeks after her funeral; of the sight of the dead pinched face under the shrouding sheet; the waxen hands folded stiffly on her sunken breast; and over it all those horrid heavy clods of clay, the rattle of which upon her coffin-lid would echo in my heart, I verily believed, until they fell upon my own. I felt the loss of her counsel, her companionship, and her love as keenly—perhaps more keenly than when I had been first deprived of them; but I thought that time had cured me of the terrible human anguish with which I had laid her in the grave. But now it was all revived. The sight of Cave Charteris had brought it back again; brought back the memory of her maternal interest in him, her confidence in his affection for me, and her self-reproach when we discovered that his attentions meant nothing, that she had not better guarded her one ewe-lamb from the deceitfulness of the world.

I sat down in my room, and tried to disentangle my thoughts from my present position and cast them back to that period when Mr. Charteris had been so intimate with us at Norwood, and to see if my riper judgment could acquit him of having wantonly played with my affections. But I remembered it all too plainly, and I could find no excuse for his behaviour. He had not had the plea of extreme youth to exonerate his want of thought. He was five-and-twenty, and I nineteen. He must have known in what light his persistent intimacy would have been accepted by my mother and myself. Besides, though he had never mentioned the subject of marriage, he had told me, over and over again, that he loved me, and hinted in every possible way at the probability of a future spent together.

It was the old story—he had loved and ridden away; and, for many months after his defection, I had sincerely believed my grief to be incurable. I was very young and innocent at that period, and credited my darling mother with cold-heartedness when she told me that a woman might love more than once in a life-time, and better the second time than the first. I had been reared close to her side, and knew nothing of the wickedness of the world nor the elasticity of the human heart. I was one of those girls who believe that it is impossible for a married woman to flirt, or an engaged woman to break her word, without being branded with public scorn; and a great deal of my grief for Cave Charteris's desertion was due to the humiliating idea that my neighbours had observed his attentions, and considered me degraded by the loss of them.

This sort of unworldly ignorance did not long continue. I was not stupid, and as my girlhood merged into womanhood, my eyes became opened to the depravity of the human race; and I learned to despise Cave Charteris instead of myself, and to see that he had been utterly unworthy of the affection and admiration I had lavished upon him.

Yet the romance of my first disappointment continued to haunt and vex me, long after common sense had bid me rejoice at the escape I had had from marrying a man who was false as well as fickle.

It may be remembered how difficult a task I found it to tell the history of my heart to poor dear Charlie Sandilands, when he came to see me at Norwood, on the day after my mother's funeral. It was the false sentiment that still hung about Cave Charteris's hair and eyes and voice, that made the task so difficult. I would not have taken the man back to my affections at that moment, if he had crawled to my feet to sue for forgiveness, because I knew him to have been utterly heartless with regard to me—yet I could have cried over a letter from him, or a lock of his hair, or an old glove that he had worn, simply because they reminded me of the faith which I had cherished and lost.

Women and men are very different in this respect. Where a man's trust has been betrayed, he becomes hard and bitter, and thrusts from him, as far as possible, everything likely to bring the loss which he has sustained to his mind again. A woman may be as disinclined to pardon as himself—as determined never again to be deceived, but she cannot give up, all at once, every little tender memory that made her dead life so much brighter than her living one. She takes the ring off her finger—the hair from her locket—but she does not throw them away. They are like the dead to her. They have no more part in her existence, but they are sacred, and she covers them up with tears and prayers, as we strew rue and rosemary upon our corpses.

So, long after my own sense of what was good and true had condemned my weakness in shedding one tear for Cave Charteris, the beauty and animation and charm of manner which had first enthralled me continued to exercise their baneful influence over my mind. I had seen that beauty again to-day and heard that voice, and what did I think of them, looking and hearing with eyes and ears that had been healed of love's sickness? Well! he was very handsome, very handsome indeed; there was no doubt of that! I remembered having heard it said, in olden days, that he had been painted by one of the Royal Academicians as 'Jason,' and having been very anxious to see the picture for which he stood.

I could well imagine that he had made an excellent model for 'Jason.' He was tall, but not too tall: men over six feet in height are seldom well proportioned. His characteristics were strictly Saxon. He had yellowish hair, cropped close to his head in soldier fashion: china blue eyes—not large, but very keen and piercing: a ruddy complexion, and finely-shaped nose and mouth. The worst fault in his appearance was the light colour of his eyebrows and lashes: and the worst fault in his expression was a look of animalism, which I seemed never to have noticed until I sat down in my own chamber and taxed my mental vision to view my old lover by the light of the new eyes with which I had regarded him that evening.

It was not only because I remembered his behaviour to myself that the expression of his face had seemed cruel to me, as he chattered so affably across the dinner-table. Five years' self-indulgence had doubtless strengthened the outward signs of his inward character: but whether he had borne those signs in embryo when we were first acquainted, I could not then recall. If he had done so, I was probably too innocent to have interpreted them aright. But there was no mistake about them now.

I was considered to be an excellent judge of character, and I had examined Cave Charteris that evening as if he had been a perfect stranger to me; and read but too plainly, in the formation of his head and features, that though he might be as beautiful as the Adonis, his intellect was held in subjugation to his passions, and hatred or revenge would have the power to turn him from a polished man of the world into a brute.

As I came to this conclusion, deliberately and without the least rancour in my mind against him, I called out aloud, '*Thank God!*' for I felt that I was healed. As the poor diseased and dying creatures whom we read of in the Holy Scriptures touched the hem of the King's garment, and experienced an immediate cure, so, in one moment, the conviction dawned upon me that what I had been fearing was a mere 'bogey,' raised by the shock of Mr. Charteris's sudden appearance amongst us; and, save for a slight feeling of shame that I should have troubled my head about him for so long, I should be able to meet him on the following morning with an outstretched hand and a heart full of gratitude for my deliverance.

Tessie had suggested, as I parted with her, that in a few days I might congratulate myself on having met him again. But a few hours had elapsed since then, and I was already full of self-congratulations. For, had I *not* encountered him, I might have gone on nursing my sickly sentimental memory of the past, until the grave swallowed me and it together.

I felt such a sudden transition from the melancholy despondency with which I had entered my chamber, to a state of freedom and whole-heartedness, that I could almost have passed to the opposite extreme, and sung, in the gratitude of my spirit. I was like a person who has burthened himself for half his life with carrying about a heavy bundle that nearly weighs him to the ground, but which he considers it imperative, on account of its value, not to part with; but who, unexpectedly discovering it is composed of worthless rubbish, casts it from his shoulders.

How light and airy he must feel! How light and airy *I* felt when I saw my bundle of rubbish at my feet!

My dearest mother was no longer under the sod then. She had risen again to paradise, and taken the place my love had assigned her amongst angels like herself.

I threw myself on my knees beside my bed, and prayed to her more than to Heaven, begging her to look down and see how earnest and sincere I was in saying I was cured, and had no regret on earth, excepting that *she* was not there to rejoice with me.

I was so excited at my discovery, that I could not sleep until I had seen the girls again, and disimbued their minds of the idea that I was fretting in my solitude.

I opened my door, and looked down the corridor. The light was streaming in a thin line of silver beneath theirs. I stepped across, and entered gently. Tessie was already in bed and half-asleep; but Ange was leaning in her nightdress on the window-sill, with her pretty bare feet upon the uncarpeted floor.

'Ange! Ange!' I exclaimed, 'you careless child! you will catch your death of cold some day, if you are not more prudent.'

'Is that Hilda?' asked Tessie, rousing herself at the sound of my voice. 'Ange, why are you not in bed yet? It must be an hour since we came upstairs. And as for you, Hilda, I hoped you were fast asleep.'

The little maid coloured up at being detected dreaming in the moonlight, and jumped lightly into bed; whilst I approached to her sister's side.

'No, Tessie dear, I have not been to sleep; but I am all right again now, and I thought I would like to come and tell you so.'

'Oh, I am very glad, Hilda! Ange and I have been very unhappy about you.'

'I know you were; but it has all passed away. Mr. Charteris's presence recalled my dear mother, and the days when she was with us, so powerfully to my mind, that I felt quite paralysed at seeing him; but that kind of thing cannot last, you know. I have taken the woman's universal remedy—'a good cry,' and my brain and heart are cleared by it. I hope Mr. Charteris did not notice my manner; but he will find it quite different to-morrow morning.'

'I don't think he did,' replied Tessie; 'we talked a good deal of you when papa and he came back again—until the Baron arrived, in fact. Mr. Charteris does not seem to remember much about the time when he knew you before; but he thought it quite natural that the sight of him should bring the remembrance of your mother back to you.'

'Did he get his horse?' I asked cheerfully.

'He has hired one for to-morrow, and Jacques Despard is going to get a lot of colts up from the valley for him to see and choose from. And only fancy, Hilda, when Arthur Thrale heard of the boar-hunt to-morrow, he would insist upon accompanying them! and the Baron says he cannot ride a bit, and is sure to be thrown. Don't you think they ought to prevent his going?'

'How can they prevent it?' exclaimed Ange; 'the Piron is open to everybody. And Mr. Charteris said it would do Arthur Thrale good to be thrown, and take some of his "*sheek*" out of him. What is "*sheek*," Hilda?'

'Has Arthur Thrale been here again?' I said, too vexed to laugh at the little maid's pronunciation; for since Mrs. Carolus had told me of his mother's letter, I had had reason to suspect that some, at least, of the lad's money was lost at our house.

'Yes, he came in as usual. They have all been as happy as possible, playing cards together,' replied Ange, with an air of complete innocence. 'I could hardly take my eyes off dear papa's face this evening. He did look so perfectly contented, sitting there with his friends! I think there must be very few people in this world who can "come down" as gracefully as he has—dear good old father! He, who has been used to a Court, and the society of the highest nobles and the greatest geniuses in the land, to be able to amuse himself in that way with one or two chance acquaintances! But it is all his goodness. He hardly ever complains. He is more like an angel than a man!'

This was the little maid's favourite assertion, and usually she expected no answer to it. But on this occasion the silence of Tessie and myself seemed to strike her unpleasantly, and she reiterated her words in the form of a question:

'Isn't he more like an angel than a man, Tessie?'

'Papa is certainly very good and contented,' replied her sister, but she sighed as she said it. 'I have often wondered that he does not more regret the scenes he has been accustomed to.'

'My wonder is that he ever left them,' I remarked. 'Why he left England in the first instance to bury himself abroad, and the Court of Prussia, where I understand he was such a prime favourite, in the second.'

'Because he is so good!' cried Ange, determinately.

'He had his own reasons for doing so, I have no doubt,' added Tessie, quietly, 'but he has never told them to us.'

'Well, I am surprised to think he can prefer St. Pucelle, and what one may call the "scratch" congregation he musters here, to the life he has been accustomed to. Cards and gossip must be sorry exchanges for the gaiety, intellect, and society that compose a Court circle. Besides, I hate cards.' I had made up my mind to say something more about the cards before long. 'They appear to me very uninteresting if played for love, and they are certainly very dangerous when played for money.'

'Do you think papa would do anything that is dangerous?' exclaimed Ange, firing up in a moment.

'Perhaps not, but what is safe for your father may be dangerous for others; such a boy as young Thrale, for instance.'

'Ah! if he went playing with anybody—yes! but that is just a part of papa's goodness. He will do what he does not care for himself, to oblige another person. I am sure Arthur Thrale's company is a great bore to him, but he will never tell him so, if he can keep him out of harm.'

'Oh, I see!' I replied, and said no more.

Ange took my words for what they seemed to be, but when I bent down to kiss Tessie's face, I found it wet with tears.

'If you think it wrong for young Thrale to come here, tell him of it,' she whispered, 'for I cannot.'

I did not answer her in words, but I kissed her a second time and squeezed her hand in acquiescence, and she understood what I meant. I did not intend to speak to Mr. Thrale, of whom I knew too little to be entitled to take any liberty with; but I thought that, if an opportunity occurred, I should be able to muster up courage to mention the subject to the Baron.

As I lay down that night, the thought of dear old Charlie Sandilands came into my head, and I felt so glad to think that

I had not known the state of my heart when he asked me to be his wife. Because, if I had, I might, in the lonely position in which he found me, have been tempted to resign all further trouble by accepting his offer. So many women have been drawn into marriage for want of money, or companionship, or protection. And I knew now, even better than I did then, that I never could have been even decently contented as Charlie Sandilands' wife.

CHAPTER XVI.

TWO SERPENTS.

I DO not think that if Tessie and Ange had foreseen that the presence of Mr. Charteris under their father's roof was to entail a series of visits from Miss Sophy Markham, they would have rejoiced so greatly at the acquisition of their boarder. But she certainly lost no time in paying the preliminary one. As I descended to breakfast the following morning, I was surprised to hear her shrill voice from the *salle*, and stopped midway in my journey to demand of Madame Marmoret in the kitchen if it were possible that I heard aright.

Madame Marmoret, with her head tied up in a red handkerchief and gold earrings dangling from her ears, looked like a picturesque and pleased old gipsy.

'For certain it is she,' was her reply, 'and why not? *Ma foi!* one would think, to see your surprise, that eight o'clock was an unheard-of hour to get out of bed. It may be the custom in England, but for St. Pucelle, thanks to the Blessed Virgin and the good Abbé, who teaches us better, we do not waste the precious time here, when it is running on so fast to carry us to our graves.'

It was very strange to me that Madame Marmoret, who as a rule hated all the English visitors to St. Pucelle, was never heard to speak ill of Miss Sophia Markham, who was the most offensive of them all !

Was it possible she could imagine her old master would be so foolish as to think of taking a second wife from amongst the surplus female population of Great Britain ; he whose habits and associations were so thoroughly naturalised to the country of his adoption, and who was too poor even to support his daughters and himself? Well, there were no limits to be put to the folly of men, young or old, in that respect ; but I trusted from the bottom of my heart, for the girls' sakes, that it was not true. The mere supposition, though, made Miss Markham's voice sound more screechy and silly than usual, as I continued on my way to the *salle.* There she sat, in her walking things, a little apart from the table, evidently waiting till the meal should be concluded, to carry out the design that brought her there.

Mr. Charteris jumped up from his seat as soon as I appeared, all smiles, bustle, and animation, and set a chair for me in my own place.

I was so glad it should be so ; that the remembrance of anything in our former intimacy that was likely to make us feel uncomfortable in the present seemed so completely to have escaped his memory, and left him free as myself to exchange the courtesies of a new acquaintanceship.

Of course my first duty was to say good-morning to Miss Markham, which was returned apparently with much fervour. There had never been any open hostilities between this lady and myself. On the contrary, we were invariably most polite to one another; nevertheless there existed a secret feud between us, which, like a smouldering fire, only required the breath of opportunity to fan into a flame. She knew, although I had never said so, that I ridiculed her silly conceit, and despised her falsehood, and she never felt quite easy in consequence when in my presence.

On the morning in question, I disturbed her in the midst of an animated conversation with Mr. Charteris, which had set the cherries in her hat in violent commotion, which had not quite subsided when a shake from my hand made them begin bobbing again.

'Miss Marsh the latest of the party!' she commenced, with an affected giggle; 'why, I'm quite astonished! I thought you were the "goody-goody" one that always set an example for the rest!'

'I'm not aware that I have ever given the world of St. Pucelle reason to make such an assertion, Miss Markham,' I said, as I drew my chair to the breakfast-table and applied my attention to bread and butter and radishes.

'Well! I'm sure Mrs. Carolus thinks so, or she would not be so constantly seeking for your company. *I*'m not good enough for her, not half. She's so afraid I shall corrupt Willy. He! he! he! She says I have too many admirers to be a safe companion. Now, Mr. Charteris, *do* you think I've got too many admirers?'

'A great many too many, Miss Markham, for the peace of one!'

'He! he! he! Well, I can't help it if the men *will* come after me, can I? I can't get a little whip and whip them away! It was always the same ever since I was a little girl. I don't know what it is in me, but they *will* come!'

'It is very easy to see what it is that attracts them, Miss Markham,' said Charteris, with a side-glance at Ange that made the poor child choke over her *tartine.*

'Oh!' cried Miss Sophy, with a conscious look that went first down and then up, and was accompanied by a titter; 'you're too bad, Mr. Charteris! you really are! but you're just like the rest of them. That is what makes Mrs. Carolus so jealous of me! She will tease me to tell her what gentlemen say to me, and then—when I do—oh, goodness! She does give it to us—doesn't she, Tiddywinks?' to the yapping terrier which she carried as usual under her arm.

'You have to pay the penalty of being so fascinating,' remarked Charteris, who seemed to be the only one disposed to talk to her. 'Everybody knows what a terrible list of killed and wounded you leave behind you wherever you go. Look at poor young Thrale! You've "mashed" him entirely, as the young ladies in America say.'

'Mr. Charteris! How *can* you? What dreadful nonsense you are talking! As if Arthur Thrale could ever be anything to me but a friend!'

'I should think no one in their senses could dream of imagining otherwise,' I interposed, rather too bluntly perhaps. 'Why, Arthur Thrale is not more than twenty, is he?'

'I'm sure I don't know what age he is,' replied Miss Sophy, rather crossly—the topic didn't please her. 'I never ask gentlemen their ages, and it has nothing whatever to do with the point in question.'

'When had Love anything to do with Age?' said Mr. Charteris, still laughing at her, though she could not see it. 'Young as poor Thrale is, you know that you have made him your slave. Why do you suppose he intends to join the boar-hunt to-day, unless it be to hear his prowess sounded in your ears?'

'Don't you think it would be kinder to persuade him not to go, Mr. Charteris,' I observed, 'since I understand that his prowess is more likely to land him on the ground than anywhere else? He is an only son, you know, and if anything were to happen to him, it would doubtless cause great distress to his family.'

'Are you acquainted with the Thrales, Hilda?' asked Mr. Lovett, in surprise.

'No, sir, not personally; but Mrs. Carolus has received a letter from Mr. Thrale's mother in England, begging her to look after her son as much as possible whilst he is here, and she repeated the contents of it to me.'

At these words, two of our little party grew considerably rosier; one was Miss Sophia Markham, the other my reverend and saintly guardian.

'It strikes me as a very extraordinary proceeding,' ejaculated the lady, 'that Mrs. Carolus should go about St. Pucelle confiding the contents of her private letters to people who are almost strangers to her.'

'Most remarkable!' acquiesced Mr. Lovett; 'and I should have thought that had Mrs. Carolus required an adviser on the subject, the pastor of her church would have been the properest person for her to confide in.'

'Do you doubt my word, then?' I asked him quickly.

'Oh no, my dear Hilda! by no manner of means. If I am disposed to blame anyone, it is Mrs. Carolus. Will you tell us what the rest of the letter contained?'

'No, sir; I would rather not. It was told me privately, if not as a secret; but if you will ask Mrs. Carolus herself, I have no doubt she will hand the epistle over to you.'

'Well, I never heard of such a thing before!' exclaimed Miss Markham, tossing her head; 'and it only convinces me of what I have known all along—that Mrs. Carolus is as mean as she is spiteful. She can repeat tales against other people, but she would be very much surprised if other people commenced to tell tales against her. I have held my tongue, of course, because I have made it a rule through life never to say a word against another woman's character, but I could tell stories, if I chose, that would shut every door in St. Pucelle against Mrs. Carolus to-morrow, and make the few hairs that poor old fool of a husband of hers still possesses stand on end with horror!'

'*I* never said she had repeated tales against anyone,' I remarked quietly; 'but I conclude from your observations that you have read the letter yourself, Miss Markham.'

She coloured still deeper at this insinuation, but she was not to be caught by it. She was an old war-horse, and had been in battle too often to lose her vantage-ground so easily.

'No, I have not!' she said, as stoutly as if she were speaking the truth. 'I receive too many letters of my own to have any time to spare for Mrs. Carolus's rubbish. But, knowing her as well as I do, I am perfectly aware that she is not likely to exchange ten minutes' conversation with any woman without trying to damage the reputation of another.'

I felt this conclusion to be so true that I had nothing to say in reply, and, the meal being ended, Mr. Lovett proposed they should walk towards the Château des Roses, where the meet for the boar-hunt was to take place.

'Are you really going to walk up the hill?' cried Miss Sophy, with sudden animation, as though the thought had never struck her before. 'Then I shall walk with you—that is,' with an arch look at Charteris, 'if you will consent to be troubled with a stupid thing like me. I love a brisk walk in the morning. There is nothing like it for health. I always go, on principle; and as for Tiddy boy, he couldn't eat his dinner if he hadn't a run first. Could you, my Sweetikins?'

Sweetikins and Mr. Charteris and Mr. Lovett having simultaneously declared that there was nothing they would enjoy so much as the company of the fair Sophia, they all set off together to walk up the hill, whilst Tessie and Ange looked after them from the window with wistful eyes. I thought how they would have enjoyed to see the hunting-party start; how Tessie would have admired her Baron on horseback, and little Ange would have been pleased with everything; and I asked them why they had not also proposed to accompany their father.

'Oh no!' said Tessie, almost shrinking at the idea. 'Papa would have mentioned it if he had wished us to go. Besides, we have so many things to keep us at home. We are not idle people like Sophy Markham. Didn't she go on in a horrid manner with Mr. Charteris, Hilda, shaking her head at him in that absurd way? I felt so ashamed of her.'

'He doesn't like it; that's one comfort!' observed Ange, over her shoulder.

'No, I should hope he had better taste, or he would hardly be pleasant company for us,' I responded heartily.

I had done with him myself, but it would have been a step lower to take in humiliation, to have watched him in an earnest flirtation with such a battered heart as that of Miss Sophy Markham.

'I do not think Mr. Charteris is the sort of man that either of you will make a *friend* of; but the acquaintanceship even of one who brought Miss Markham in his train would not be calculated to render our home more comfortable.'

The girls both looked startled at my assertion.

'Not make a friend of, Hilda?' repeated Tessie; 'isn't he *nice*, then?'

'Very nice, dear, as far as I know; but for friendship you want something more than "*niceness*." You want sympathy in taste and feeling; and I fancy Mr. Charteris is too much addicted to field-sports to make a good companion for women. Arthur Thrale is more fitted for such a capacity.'

'*Arthur Thrale!*' ejaculated Ange with glorious contempt, as she slipped away in answer to a loud demand for her in Madame's sweet voice.

'Hilda,' said Tessie, coming closer to my side, 'what was it that Arthur's mother wrote to Mrs. Carolus about? Was it—of—of—what we were speaking last night?'

'Not exactly, Tessie; but I much fear it has something to do with it. It concerned a loss of money on the boy's part.'

'Oh, what *shall* we do? what *shall* we do?'

I had never heard such a tone of despair in Tessie's quiet voice before, and when I turned to look at her the tears had gathered in her eyes again, and her face was drawn with anxiety and pain.

'Don't cry, Tessie,' I said, kissing her—'it is no fault of yours;

and if boys will be foolish, they must pay the penalty. However, I mean to——'

'My dear Miss Lovett, I hope I am not interrupting you!' exclaimed the voice of Mrs. Carolus, at the open door; 'if so, I will go back at once: indeed, I told my Willy I should not be absent more than ten minutes, but I just wanted to ask the question, have you seen Sophy Markham anywhere this morning?'

I had started forward to receive our visitor, and give Tessie time to dry her eyes, or the intelligence that she had been crying would have been communicated to the whole of St. Pucelle before sunset. I felt more kindly towards Mrs. Carolus also than to Miss Markham, because, although they were equally ill-natured to the world, the one had been more friendly to me than the other.

'Yes! Miss Markham has but just left us,' I replied. 'She was here before breakfast, and went up the hill directly afterwards with——'

'Not with Mr. Charteris?' exclaimed Mrs. Carolus, as she clasped her hands and sunk into a chair.

'Yes, with Mr. Charteris and Mr. Lovett!' I replied, unable to help laughing at the tragic attitude she had assumed.

'Oh, Miss Marsh, it is too bad! it is too bad of her altogether! I cast her off from to-day. I refuse to have anything more to do with her! She is not a respectable person to be associated with, nor to have living in one's house.'

'I think you are rather hard on her, Mrs. Carolus. She is very silly, I know, but you need have no fear that Mr. Charteris will do more than laugh at her! Indeed, I am afraid he was laughing at her all breakfast-time, but she did not seem to see it.'

'She never sees anything, my dear. She is eaten up with self-conceit, and if the whole world bowed down before her in mock homage she would take it for real, and accept it as her due. She fancies she is a giddy little butterfly, and that gentlemen admire her childish voice and ways, and are attracted by them. She would no more believe that they ridicule her afterwards than that they imagine her to be more than five-and-twenty! It is the *truth*, my dear girls. If I had to die the next moment, I should say the same thing. She actually had the audacity to tell me last week that Mr. Charteris had guessed her age at five-and-twenty. And she is five-and-fifty if she is a day!'

Tessie and I both laughed so immoderately at this, that we encouraged Mrs. Carolus to proceed with her complaints.

'When she came and told me that she had seen Mr. Charteris at Rille, and persuaded him to come to St. Pucelle, I looked her in the face and said solemnly: "Sophia Markham, can you assure me that if that young man comes here you will not carry on with him in the disgraceful way you did last year at Brussels? because, if so," I said, "tell me at once, and I will leave the place before shame drives me from it." For if you could have seen, my dears, the things that went on between those two, you would have been as disgusted as I was.'

'Come, Mrs. Carolus!' I deprecated, 'you are taking away Mr. Charteris's character now, remember, as well as that of your friend.'

'Oh! my dear, it wasn't *his* fault! Poor fellow, what could he do with a woman running after him morning, noon, and night, and dodging him wherever he went? His life was a martyrdom to him. But where Sophia takes a fancy she has no mercy!'

'This becomes serious !' I replied, with mock gravity ; 'what shall we do to save him ?'

'Nothing will save him,' said Mrs. Carolus, seriously. 'Who is to control a woman of that age ? I cannot do it ! And fancy her having the forwardness to attack him the very first morning. She would have come round last night if she had dared. But, bless my soul ! isn't that Sophy herself coming down the hill ? So it is. The hunting-party must have started, then ; she wouldn't leave them one moment sooner, you may take my word for that ! Oh ! she has caught my eye, I *must* nod to her. She has the most suspicious temper in the world, and would be sure to think, if she saw me here, that I had come up expressly to abuse her. Ah ! now she must come in, of course, and I shall be obliged to walk through the town with her, while she makes herself conspicuous at every step. Well, Sophy dear, have you enjoyed your walk ?'

To hear these two women abuse each other when apart, and to see the marvellous transformation that took place in their speech, manner, and expression, as soon as they found themselves together again, was to witness one of the most curious phases of this world's deceit.

'Sophy dear' bent down and kissed Mrs. Carolus's cheek before she answered :

'Pretty well ! I wish you had been with us, Lizzie ! Monsieur de Nesselrode looked so graceful on horseback ! and *your* flame Charteris has a seat like a centaur. I really think the horse Despard has sent him would throw any ordinary rider.'

'*My* flame ! You wretch !' cried the married lady, with girlish indignation, as she made a playful poke at Miss Sophy with her parasol. 'I wonder what my Willy would say, to hear you talk like that. And when I have just been telling Miss Marsh and Miss Lovett how you ran away from us before breakfast this morning, in order to see the gentlemen start!'

'I didn't do any such thing,' responded her friend. 'You are such lazy creatures, I should get no breakfast till ten o'clock if I waited for you. And it was really incumbent on me to be home again somewhat early this morning, Lizzie; for I must alter that new costume of yours before you wear it again. It is crooked in the back, and makes your nice straight figure look quite like that of an old woman.'

'Thanks, dear! You don't know what a clever creature this is, Miss Marsh! She makes all her own dresses and bonnets and mantles; and she has been so good-natured, since she has been staying with me, in altering and manufacturing my wardrobe, that I am sure I don't know what I shall do when she is gone.'

'Perhaps I don't mean to go,' said Miss Markham, facetiously.

'You droll creature! Not if some one of your numerous admirers proposes to carry you off?'

'Ah, that would be a different thing. But if I married to-day,' continued Miss Sophy, with the confidence in marriage of eighteen, 'you would send back for me to-morrow!'

'Did you ever hear such impudence!' cried Mrs. Carolus, appealing to us. 'She actually imagines I couldn't do without her! Well, Sophy, in that case, I suppose I should have to give house-room to *il caro sposo* as well.'

'I rather fancy you would! Do you think I should come without him? I shall make too great a pet of my husband for that.'

'Well, he'll be a lucky fellow, whoever he is, when the day comes,' responded Mrs. Carolus.

Tessie and I, listening open-mouthed to this extraordinary example of feminine friendship, could not but believe that the last sentence at least was intended for sarcasm. But if so, no inflection of the speaker's voice betrayed it. The words left her lips as glibly as though she were sounding the praises of her dearest friend.

I turned away, sick at this exhibition of deceit, and thinking what mischief it was *not* in the power of such women to create, who could lie with impunity, not only to each other but themselves. I stood there, silent and thoughtful, until, to my relief, I heard their voices in chorus, declaring it was time to go.

'Good-bye, Miss Marsh! Good-bye, Miss Lovett! Come, Sophy dear,' said Mrs. Carolus, blithely.

'All right, Lizzie dear,' replied the other. 'Ta-ta, girls! I dare say I shall see you again before long;' and so they interlinked arms, and went down the road together lovingly.

Tessie and I turned and looked into each other's faces.

'Is it not sickening?' I asked her, after a pause.

'It frightens me,' she answered; and as I saw her pale face and lips, I believed that the insight she had experienced to falsehood had really caused her fear.

CHAPTER XVII.

ALL FOR TESSIE.

It was about this time that my eyes became first opened to the fact that old Mr. Lovett, notwithstanding his benevolent aspect and many protestations of affection, was exceedingly selfish with regard to his daughters. How those girls worked for, waited on, and believed in him! From the making of his bed and the setting in order of his room, to the starching and ironing of his muslin bands and the cooking of his particular dainties, Tessie and Ange did everything for him with their own hands. And what was better, they did it cheerfully. There was never any question with them as to *which* should undertake the duties; they only vied with one another to perform them first. I never saw two daughters more devoted to their father in my life: yet there was a difference in the manner with which they served him.

Ange did it with blind unwavering faith in the privilege she enjoyed. It was impossible not to read her perfect admiration and pride in the expression of her face. Her father was the highest creature in the world to her, and she the most favoured of girls to be able to call him hers.

But with Tessie's service, willingly though it was rendered, there was mingled a sort of pitying fondness—more like the protecting love we accord to a child, proud though we may be of him, than the humility with which we wait upon our superior. I used to think—and I thought a great deal in those days, more perhaps than was good for me—that the affection of Ange for her father resembled what a wife's should be for her husband (but so very seldom is); whilst Tessie's was more like that of a mother.

But without thus analysing their mainsprings, no doubt remained as to the love and duty they both displayed for him. And he took it all as his due. I could have forgiven him that, considering the relationship he bore to them, had he only appeared sometimes to consider them in return.

But his selfishness never permitted him to perceive that they made daily sacrifices on his account; that they lived on the commonest fare, pretending they liked it, whilst he enjoyed his flesh or fowl; and sat up late at night to recopy some faded old sermon, whilst he played cards with his friends in the *salle à manger*. Were he in the humour for it, he would keep them running up and down stairs on errands for him all day long, until they were quite faint with fatigue—especially Ange, who, notwithstanding her bright, fugitive colour, was, like most English girls reared on the Continent, anything but strong. And when he had kept them up long beyond their usual hour for rest, he would suddenly remember that a surplice, or a shirt, or something equally important, must be 'got up' by the following afternoon, and compel the poor children to be out of bed again the first thing in the morning, in order to get the washing and starching and ironing over before the more important duties of the day began.

Ange had said once that few people could 'come down' as gracefully as her father had. I used to think, on the contrary, that he had never learned how to 'come down' at all, but was like a spoilt child who will insist upon having all he wants, never mind what others may suffer in consequence!

His selfishness was especially apparent in the little trouble that he took to give his daughters any amusement. There were so few excitements in St. Pucelle; the days slipped away one after another in such a monotonous round of uneventfulness, that it was cruel to debar these girls of even one pleasure which they might have legitimately enjoyed.

Yet they might have been two little nuns, for the seclusion in which he kept them. Except to visit the poor or to walk in the fields, they scarcely ever left the house, and days sometimes elapsed without their putting their feet outside of it.

Their visit to the Château des Roses had been a real treat to them. They had talked of it for hours beforehand and for weeks after; but though the Baron de Nesselrode had begged Mr. Lovett over and over again to take us there for another day, he had put it off for his own business, until the matter had died away. On more than one occasion, during my residence in St. Pucelle, a little dance was got up by the visitors in the principal hotel, and the English curé's pretty daughters were asked each time to be present.

I had seen Ange's lovely face flush with anticipation, and Tessie's also, though in a less degree, but it had all come to nothing. Mr. Lovett had hummed and hawed and smiled sweetly on the inviter, and as good as promised his girls should attend the party, and then dropped the subject altogether. Once I ventured to ask Tessie why she did not remind her father of his promise, as he might, perhaps, have forgotten it; but she shook her head, and said it would be better not. Ange and she had no dresses fit to appear in, and papa would not like to see them worse clad than the rest.

'But a muslin dress, Tessie!' I urged, 'costs very little, and nothing could be more suitable for a dance in St. Pucelle!'

Still Tessie shook her head, and begged me to say no more about it, as it was impossible.

It was on that occasion, I remember, that I asked her, downright, what allowance her father gave her sister and herself for dress—and how they spent it.

'*Allowance!*' she repeated, with open eyes. 'Oh, Hilda! how can you think dear papa could afford to make us an allowance! You do not nearly understand how poor we are! Do you know, we should be unable to get on as well as we do, if it were not for the kindness of papa's old pupil, the Prince de Ritzburg. He often sends us a bank-note in his letters, and when we lived near the Court, and any English nobles or princes were staying there, papa was invited to the state dinners, and there was always a bank-note put under his plate. Wasn't it good of him? But he owes a great deal to papa, who was almost his only tutor.'

'But, Tessie!' I said, more interested in the question of her allowance than the gratitude of Prince Francius de Ritzburg, 'if you have no money, who pays for your dresses?'

'We have only got a decent one apiece,' she answered, laughing. 'I think Madame paid for these; I know she went over to Artois in the spring and bought them, and grumbled terribly at the price. But they couldn't have cost much, Hilda; they are only serge.'

'I do not think anything you could wear could become you better, Tessie,' I said truthfully; 'still, I do wish your papa would let you go to this party. Ange *would* enjoy it so.'

'Of course she would—the darling! But we cannot afford it. It is quite impossible! so please say no more about it, Hilda.'

Yet the very same day, at dinner, Mr. Lovett had a dish of *salmi* of wild duck stewed in port wine placed before him, and I noticed that Madame drew the cork of his second bottle of Moselle before we left the table. It was such things that, little by little, let daylight in upon my mind, until it was enabled to read his whole character aright.

Monsieur de Nesselrode had been constantly at the house since the day we spent at the Château des Roses, but no one saw much of him except Mr. Lovett. He would salute us on entering the room, or passing in the road, and address a few polite inquiries respecting our health ; but the strict etiquette which is preserved between the unmarried of both sexes, abroad, was in full force with Ange and Tessie, who never seemed to speak to a man except in monosyllables.

I confess this extreme decorum rather oppressed me. I was always longing to have my inferior mind drawn out and elevated by those superior to itself, and my dear mother had encouraged me in the idea that men were meant to be friends to women as well as lovers ; and that it was not always necessary that the last state should be worse than the first. I had been very proud, at one time, to be considered worthy of engaging in argument with such a clever man as Mr. Warrington, and had felt the greatest interest in trying to defeat him with his own weapons, which is not an unusual termination to such intellectual skirmishes. And now, to see Tessie's drawn-down lip and Ange's look of dismay, if I stopped to say more than '*Bon jour, monsieur,*' when we met Armand de Nesselrode, was aggravating to me. I wanted very much to speak to him about young Thrale, for I had an intuition that he would try and befriend the boy, but it was quite impossible that I should do so before Mr. Lovett or either of the girls.

I had determined, therefore, that when an opportunity occurred for me to see the Baron alone, I would set all the absurd rules of foreign etiquette at defiance, and tell him just what was in my mind. More than that, I do not mind confessing, at this date, that on several occasions, when I was able to leave the house by myself, I walked up and down the hill that led to the château in hopes of seeing him; but fate was against me, and we never met. It was to be, however, and at last it came to pass.

One day, about a fortnight after Mr. Charteris had taken up his abode with us, most of which time he had spent at the château, or in the forest of Piron, some caprice—want of excitement, probably—took him back to Rille for a couple of nights.

We had been feasting—that is, I should say, Mr. Lovett had been feasting—more than usually well since his guest's arrival, and owing to that, I suppose, on the very day he left us the old gentleman was obliged to take to his bed with a bilious attack.

Of course, his girls were in a fine fright. If their father had been seized with *cholera morbus* they could scarcely have gone about with longer faces, and the fact that he could not eat anything seemed to fill them with greater alarm than anything else. In vain I assured them that fasting was the best thing possible under the circumstances; in vain did Madame Marmoret, who was in her very worst temper, thank the Blessed Virgin, in a voice that might have been heard at the other end of St. Pucelle, that her master at last knew what it was to have an empty stomach (though why that circumstance should render her so grateful I did not at that moment understand). Poor Tessie and Ange continued to look scared and pale, and could not be persuaded to leave their father's bedside even to eat their own meals.

It was a very lonely day for me, for I did not consider the duties of a ward included making a third attendant in the sick-room; and I could not help feeling just a little wickedly pleased, with spiteful Madame Marmoret, that my guardian's greedy selfishness should not go entirely unpunished.

'Mamselle Ange is calling you,' said Madame, in her curtest voice, as she thrust her head into the room where I was sitting and ruminating on these things.

'Won't you do as well?' I answered, as curtly as herself, for the woman's persistent rudeness was beginning to make me angry.

'You can go and ask her,' she said, as she slammed the door in my face, and I felt if this kind of thing went on much longer, I should be hung for putting arsenic in Madame's matutinal cup of coffee.

I walked out of the front door and through the garden-gate in the side wall to the corridor, rather than pass through her domains whilst she remained in so vile a mood.

'What is it you want of me, Ange?' I asked.

'Only to give a message to Monsieur le Baron, if he should call,' she whispered. 'Papa's kind regards, and he is too ill to see him to-night. Do you mind, Hilda dear? I would ask Madame, but she is in such a dreadful temper. Tessie and I have had to do everything for ourselves.'

'I don't mind at all. It is no trouble. But are you not coming down to tea?'

'I think we might, one at a time, as papa is asleep.'

I persuaded her to return with me, and protected by each other's presence, we made a raid upon the larder, and procured all that was necessary for the meal ourselves, whilst Madame called us by every name she could possibly think of. We were 'pigs,' 'thieves,' 'beggars,' 'paupers,' 'vile English,' everything, in fact, that was bad ; but we laughed in her face, and carried off our bread and butter and coffee to the *salle* in triumph.

And then I made pale little Ange refresh herself before returning to the side of her petulant old parent, when it was her sister's turn to come down and be comforted with the assurance that the attack would do her father all the good in the world, and bring him out again in the course of a few days with a more brilliant complexion than before.

They stayed with me as short a time as they could, and I did not press them to remain longer. I had made a great resolution to speak to the Baron about Arthur Thrale that very night. Such an opportunity as now presented itself might never occur again, and I was determined not to lose it.

So, after the girls had left me, I sat in the *salle* awaiting his arrival.

About eight o'clock he came. He looked rather startled as he perceived that, except for myself, the room was empty, but I soon told him the reason.

'Mr. Lovett is not well to-day, monsieur, and the girls are nursing him,' I said in my faltering French—I could speak the language better with anyone than with the Baron—'but I have little doubt he will be downstairs again to-morrow.'

'In that case, mademoiselle,' he answered, 'I suppose I had better take my leave.'

I can see him now as he uttered those words with a slight tone of regret in his voice.

I was sitting in the broad window-sill, which was framed in a clustering wreath of vine and fig leaves, and he was standing leaning against the wall, and looking down upon me with those unfathomable dark eyes of his, and his broad-brimmed soft felt *sombrero* in his hand.

'Will you not rest yourself for a few minutes before you start again, monsieur?' I said politely, waving my hand towards a chair.

'If I thought—if I believed,' he stammered—'that is, if I shall not be infringing the rules of etiquette, I shall be only too much pleased to exchange a few words with mademoiselle.'

'It is according to your own pleasure,' I answered. 'In our country, the rules are not so strict with regard to ladies and gentlemen conversing together as they are in yours. We have much greater freedom in England than you have here.'

'And much happier marriages in consequence,' he said, as he seated himself. 'Yes, I have heard as much, and there is scarcely a Frenchman who does not deplore the formalities of society that require him to marry a wife to whose mind he is a stranger.'

'Yet I suppose none of you are found brave enough to break through so formidable a barrier as custom,' I replied, curious to find out, on Tessie's account, if my companion were already *fiancé* or not. 'You yourself, monsieur, have doubtless been compelled to follow the example of those who have gone before you.'

'Ah! mademoiselle! I fear you are laughing at me. You forget the terrible reverse which my fortune has experienced. What father would promise the hand of his child to a beggar? It is true that I was *fiancé* to my cousin, Mademoiselle Blanche de Beaupré, before I lost my money, when our betrothal was at once cancelled.'

'You do not appear to have felt it much,' I said, smiling.

'Can I be expected to do so? I used to see my cousin at intervals in the presence of her parents. She was very charming—not strictly handsome, perhaps, but distinguished in appearance and innocent as a child. She would doubtless have been all I could have desired in the Baronne de Nesselrode, but I never spoke two words to her alone in my life.'

'Do you think she would have made you happy, then?'

'Ah! mademoiselle, happiness is hardly the thing we think of most in married life. Society requires so much of us, it is impossible for a husband and wife to be always together; and to feel more than a proper esteem for one another would soon prove *ennuyante;* more than that, a source of unhappiness, because it would create a longing for each other's company which could not be gratified.'

'I cannot bear to hear you talk like that, monsieur. Marriage with us is meant to be the holiest and happiest state possible on earth—the fusing of two lives into one; and you speak of it as if it were only a matter of convenience, and a wife were an unpleasant necessity that the less you saw of the better.'

I spoke petulantly, for I thought if these were his real sentiments, what chance was there that he would ever cast his eyes in the direction of my modest, gentle Tessie, who, though not calculated, perhaps, to shine in the world of society, would make so sweet and true a companion for a man's privacy?

'Pardon,' he replied, 'I spoke of marriage as it is amongst us—not as it should be. But I confess to never having met with these perfect unions. I regard them as I do heaven, as something that may exist, but which I am never likely to see.'

'I have seen many of them. They are common enough in our country,' I answered, thinking of my mother's love for my dead father, and of dear Mrs. Sandilands, who had never changed her widow's cap and gown, although she had parted with her husband ten years before.

'So I have heard. In England people marry very early also, and on little money. That seems almost incredible to me.'

'Do you think, then, that money is the source of happiness, monsieur?'

'I have been led to believe that no *woman* can be happy without it. When a man loses his fortune, he loses all chance of being loved; and that is a proof, is it not, that my belief is true?'

'But I do not admit the truth of your assertion. A woman who is worth anything, will love a man all the more for his misfortunes. She is born to share and lighten his trouble. Whilst he is prosperous, he has friends all over the world. When he is unlucky, he should always be able to turn with confidence to the true heart that beats for him at home.'

'Ah! mademoiselle! you are speaking now, not of women, but of angels.'

'Then there are plenty of people on earth that ought to be in heaven!'

'We have not such women in this country,' said the Baron, musingly.

'There must be good and bad in all countries, monsieur, if you only knew where to look for them. It is a common saying in ours, "A good daughter makes a good wife," and it is very true. To understand a woman's real character you must see her at home, with her parents and her brothers and sisters; and if she is loving and kind to them, she is pretty sure to be the same to you.'

I said this, intending it, of course, to direct his thoughts towards Tessie, but he did not seem to take the hint.

'You must have had an excellent mother, mademoiselle, to teach you like this,' was all he said.

'Ah! she was so good, monsieur! Had you known her, you would never have thought evil of any woman again for her sake. My father was once very rich, as you were, and he lost almost all his money too, through an unlucky speculation. We had to give up our grand house and carriage and horses, and come down to live in furnished apartments. The loss broke my father's heart, but I never once heard my mother complain. She never left his side until he died, and then she never left mine until she died herself. She was an angel to both of us; a true womanly angel, such as you may find in hundreds on this earth, if you have only the sense to know them when you see them, and the worth to deserve their love when you have found it.'

'I am not worthy! I shall never deserve such love!' he said, in a voice of pain.

'Ah! monsieur, forgive me for speaking so boldly, but how much worthier you might make yourself of it, if you tried. I hope you did not think me forward for asking you to stay here for a few minutes to-night, but I have a great wish to intercede with you—not for yourself, but another.'

'For Monsieur Charteris?' he exclaimed quickly.

'*Mr. Charteris!*' I echoed, somewhat scornfully. '*No!* If he chooses to do what is unwise, it is no concern of mine ! He is quite old enough to look after himself. The one for whom I desire to ask your interference is young Arthur Thrale. He is only a boy, monsieur, and his relations at home are uneasy at the way in which he is going on in St. Pucelle. Will you try and prevent it ? Will you speak to him yourself, and advise him to leave off coming here in the evening, and especially to give up playing cards ? You know he loses money over them, and it is his father's money he is wasting, not his own ! Even if it were, I should ask the same thing of you : to stretch out your hand and save him. I cannot do it myself, for various reasons, the chief being that I live in this house. Will you do it for me ?'

'How can I tell the lad to give up that which he knows I practise myself ?' replied Monsieur de Nesselrode, with a very crest-fallen air.

Should I be brave and go on and say all that was in my mind concerning him ? His humble air reassured me. I resolved that I would.

'Monsieur,' I commenced again, pleadingly, 'give it up on your own account also. It has already caused the misfortune of your life, and the continuance of it must be putting the day of your deliverance further and further off.'

'It is,' he muttered in a low voice.

'Oh ! monsieur ! you have suffered very much ! I know you have ! Don't drive away the bright hope that is in the future for you—the double hope of being able to move in your own sphere, in the position your ancestors assigned you, and of making a little heaven for yourself at home. Do give up gambling, for the sake of your friends if not for yourself : for the sake of those whom you lead into wrong with you, and for the sake of the future.'

To my intense surprise the Baron leapt to his feet and seized my hand.

'I *will!*—I *will!*' he exclaimed fervently. 'As there is a God in heaven, mademoiselle, I swear to you I will never touch a card from this day again. You are right! you are *quite* right! Every word you have uttered sounded on my heart like an inspiration. I have been miserable for months past. Each day I have gone deeper and deeper into debt, and put, as you say, the day of my liberty further away from me. It may be years before I am free, but I will never touch a card again so long as I live.'

'Oh! I am so glad! I *am* so glad!' I cried, excited beyond measure at the unexpected success of my undertaking; 'and you will never regret it, monsieur! I am sure you will not! And Mr. Thrale, too! You will speak to him and point out the folly of his losing his money for a mere game, and give him all the good advice in your power.'

'Monsieur Lovett will be very much surprised at my determination,' said the Baron, suddenly struck with the difficulties that stood in the way of reformation.

'Tell him the truth! It is the best and most honourable course to pursue, and surely he can never so far deny his profession as to blame you for giving up what your conscience warns you against. And devote yourself to your hunting and shooting and reading, monsieur, until that happy time comes when you can go back to Paris and hold your own again. Perhaps you may marry Mademoiselle de Beaupré after all—who knows?'

'Never, mademoiselle! Neither she nor any other Paris belle. Doubtless, when I am once more in the enjoyment of my fortune, many women—such women as I spoke of to you—will be ready to spend it for me, but it will be in vain. You have opened my eyes this evening to the fact that there are other women in this world—disinterested, whole-hearted and true. And if I can find such an one willing to share my poverty, I will work day and night till I place her in the position my wife should hold: if not—why I will do without a Baronne de Nesselrode at all.'

'Oh! you will find her, monsieur! never fear, if you will only keep a sharp look-out,' I answered, laughing.

If he had told me outright that he meant to try his luck with Tessie, I should hardly have believed more firmly than I did that her sweet face was in his mind's eye as he spoke to me. It made me very glad. Her loving heart and patient endurance deserved so bright a lot that no one could envy her the best fortune that might occur. And *this* fortune, I felt as I looked at Armand de Nesselrode, would be very bright indeed. The young man had so much good in him, beneath the crust of despondency and defiance of public opinion which his self-entailed losses and the desertion of his relatives had caused him to assume, and I was sure that renewed prosperity and the love of a true heart would bring out the best points of his character, instead of obliterating them.

To some people misfortune acts as a blister instead of a purge: it irritates instead of humbling them; and when the wheel turns in the right direction, gratitude makes them good.

So I believed it would be—was already commencing to be—

with Armand de Nesselrode; so I fervently hoped it might be, for Tessie's sake.

'Mademoiselle!' his soft voice broke in upon my reverie, 'if I am not presumptuous in hoping you will listen to me, may I at some future day tell you of the chapter of accidents which led me to this downfall?'

'I shall be very pleased to hear it, monsieur!'

'I do not wish you to think me worse than I really am—you, who appear to believe I have still the capability of rising.'

'I *do* believe it!'

'Then I will try to make your belief a certainty,' he answered, as he bent over my hand and raised it, foreign fashion, to his lips, before he bowed and left me.

I was very much gratified with the success of my boldness. I felt that I had gained even more than I strove for. Monsieur de Nesselrode would not only give Arthur Thrale some sterling good advice, but do what was better still—set him the example of doing right.

For what Mr. Charteris and my guardian might think of the new arrangement I cared little. They must play by themselves for the future. It was not likely I should interfere to save either of them.

But the Baron was quite different. The Baron had a great end in view which he was destroying by this fatal proclivity for gaming, and no means could have been too strong to adopt in order to rescue him. Particularly as it was all for Tessie!

As I sat in the evening light after he had left me, thinking of the interview just concluded, and softly stroking the hand he had raised to his lips, I kept on repeating, in a tone of the greatest satisfaction to myself, that I had done it all for Tessie.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A REVELATION.

I HAD begun to be ashamed to meet Mrs. Carolus. Ange's silver earrings had only cost twenty-five francs, but I had not the wherewithal to pay for them, and I felt mean and shabby every time I saw her, and did not broach the subject of remuneration.

At last I resolved to make a second appeal to Mr. Lovett about my money. I did not feel timid this time; I felt angry. It was inconsiderate of the old man to leave me without funds for so long. It was part of the same selfishness which made him so unmindful of his daughters' feelings, but I was not his daughter, whatever he might call me before strangers, and I determined to put up with it no longer.

I am afraid I had not the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit. I never have had. I can endure a great deal when it is accompanied by an open and honest dislike, because we cannot always command our fancies in this world. But anything like shuffling, meanness, or deceit, has ever inspired me with the supremest contempt. So when Mr. Lovett, having recovered his bilious attack, was moving amongst us again, I seized the first occasion of finding myself alone with him to broach the subject.

'I think you must have forgotten my allowance, Mr. Lovett. I have been obliged to contract a debt in consequence, and am anxious to defray it.'

I did not speak very cordially, nor do I suppose I looked so. The things I had heard and seen lately were beginning to make me feel a species of dislike for my guardian. And his manner had not been as affectionate to me the last two days, either. Whether he suspected me of having had any hand in the Baron's determination not to play cards again—a determination which hitherto he had faithfully kept—I do not know, but more than once I had caught him looking at me in a suspicious manner, as if he thought me rather a dangerous animal than otherwise; and one or two observations he had let fall with respect to his dislike to see young women mix themselves up with affairs that did not concern them, rather confirmed me in the idea that more had come to his knowledge than I intended.

But that gave me little concern, and I spoke to him now as boldly as was my right to do, considering that I only asked for what was my own. He pretended to have forgotten all about it.

'Your allowance, my dear! Is it due?'

'I don't know, Mr. Lovett; but if not, will you please give me some in advance, as Mrs. Carolus was kind enough to procure something for me in Rille, and I have not been able to repay her yet?'

He looked up at me, over the number of the *Siècle* he was perusing, with an air of great concern.

'I am very sorry to hear that, Hilda. To go in debt is to fall into an error which I have most carefully guarded my own children against. I would rather see them run about with bare feet than wear stockings and shoes for which they were unable to pay.'

'I dare say, sir, but I could not help it. I wanted something by a certain time—it was those earrings for Ange's birthday—and as you had not remembered to give me any money, and

Mrs. Carolus offered to pay for them till you did, I thought it was no harm to let her do so.'

'Dear! dear! dear! This sort of reckless expenditure makes me feel very sad. It is a habit that will grow upon you, Hilda, and you must check it at once. And for my child's birthday, too; I should never have approved of your offering as I seemed to do had I known it was not paid for.'

'Well, sir, it was not my fault. I would have sent the money at once if I had had it to send. And, I assure you, you need not alarm yourself about my getting into debt; my mother and I contrived to live on our little income without owing a penny to anyone. I am not a child, you must remember, first learning the use of money. I was my mother's housekeeper for years, and paid for everything we had. No one knows better than I do how to economise and make money go to its farthest extent.'

'I am very glad to hear it, my dear, for, unless you marry well, you will have to live a very frugal life,' he said, and he was actually returning to the study of his newspaper without another word.

I stood by him for a few minutes in silence, and then I began again:

'But I *must* have some money now, if you please, Mr. Lovett. I cannot put off paying Mrs. Carolus any longer.'

'Well, I suppose you must; but I do hope this is the last time I shall ever hear of your having run into debt, Hilda. It is a terrible habit for a young woman to get into. How much do you owe Mrs. Carolus?'

'Twenty-five francs for the earrings; but I want a lot of things for my own use, Mr. Lovett, which I really cannot go any longer without.'

'*Twenty-five francs!*' he repeated, as if those words were the only ones he had heard, 'that is a ruinous sum, surely, to expend on a birthday present!'

'Hardly so, for an ornament. I thought them wonderfully cheap. However, cheap or dear, they have to be paid for.'

'Twenty-five francs!' he ejaculated, for the second time. 'Why, it would keep a poor family for a week, and to think it should be wasted on a mere piece of vanity!'

'It is better than spending it on champagne or losing it at cards,' I answered wickedly.

Mr. Lovett flushed up to his handsome brow with anger. I could see the rosy colour mantling there, above the top of the *Siècle*, and I thought for a moment he was about to rebuke me for my impudence. But policy got the better of his annoyance, I suppose, for he elected to say nothing, at all events on that subject.

'You shall have the money this afternoon,' he observed coldly, after a pause; 'I have no change in my pocket at this moment.'

'I shall have been here three months next week,' I said, 'so I suppose you will call that the quarter, will you not, Mr. Lovett?'

But to this question he vouchsafed no reply.

'You said something, you know,' I continued, 'about making it eighty pounds a year instead of fifty; but if that would be inconvenient to you just at present, I am quite willing to take what was first arranged between us—that is twelve pounds ten—at all events to go on with. You could make it up to me next quarter if you thought fit.'

'You shall have the money this afternoon,' repeated my guardian, in an offended tone, and leaving me quite uncertain whether he intended to accept my offer or not.

Finding I could get no further satisfaction I slipped out of the room, humming an air as I went. I would not let the old man see how vexed I was, but I remembered that Mr. Warrington had promised to make it a proviso that my actions were to be subjected to no control, and I determined that, if matters went on as they were doing now, I would take advantage of that clause and leave St. Pucelle.

Only for a moment, though—the next I felt that I could never separate myself from Tessie and Ange—and—and others there for such a trifle as an old man's temper. The hours passed away until the afternoon, when I had agreed to take a walk with Tessie: and as I entered my room to dress, I spied a small round white packet, which decidedly held money, placed upon my toilet-table.

'Hurrah!' I mentally ejaculated. 'It is all right, then! Here is my allowance.'

I quickly unfolded the coins. Inside their wrapper was written in pencil:

'MY DEAR HILDA,

'I enclose you the means by which to defray your debt to Mrs. Carolus, and I sincerely trust it may be the last you will ever incur.

'Yours truly,

'HORACE LOVETT.'

I counted the money that lay upon the table. Twenty-five francs alone. The exact sum I owed for the earrings, and not a sou over to purchase any necessaries for myself.

It was too bad! I could have cried with vexation and disappointment. All the trouble I had taken had been thrown away, and it was evident that if I wished to get anything more out of the Reverend Horace, the unpleasant scenes I had passed through would have to be enacted over again. But I resolved it should not be so; that I would not subject myself to any further humiliation, but write straight to Mr. Warrington instead, and inform him of the state of affairs and ask him to settle matters with Mr. Lovett for me.

My face was still heated with excitement and annoyance, when Tessie knocked at my door and asked if I were ready to go out. I threw the coins into a drawer and joined her at once.

I was not in a mood to prove very pleasant company, but anything is better than staying at home to brood over trouble. The good influences to which we lay ourselves open, always make it appear less in the fresh air.

Tessie was an excellent sympathiser. She knew when to talk and when to be silent, and on the present occasion she let me walk along in converse with myself only, until shame roused me to be more serviceable and friendly.

'Where is Ange, Tessie?'

'Lying down at home with a headache.'

'That is very unlike the "little maid," is it not?'

'Yes! Not that she exactly confessed to a headache; but she was lazy, and preferred reading one of the books Mr. Charteris brought from Rille the other day.'

'Ah! *c'est autre chose!* You look as if you had a headache too, Tessie.'

'Do I? I have been a little worried, that is all.'

'Poor child! which of us is without worries? Have we any particular end in walking this way?'

We were on the road to the Château des Roses.

'Yes, I want to call at the Fromards'. Guillaume is worse to-day, and—and papa has sent them a little money.'

'That is very good of him,' I remarked sarcastically, wishing that 'papa' would be just before he was generous.

We were scarcely prepared, however, for the scene that awaited us in the cottage of the Fromards. It was a poor place, with plastered walls and a deep thatched roof that almost extinguished it.

The sides of the house were yellow and green with dirt and decay, and the smoke of the peat fire was issuing from a hole in the roof, instead of by its legitimate egress, the dilapidated chimney. In front of the entrance door ran a gutter of filthy water, and a large heap of manure and refuse was banked up against the wooden stand which was to be seen outside each door in St. Pucelle, and on which the slaughtered pigs were laid out to be halved and quartered.

A few fowls regaling themselves on the dunghill recalled to my mind the fact that it was here Ange came whenever she wanted fresh eggs for her father's breakfast ; but I had barely had time to take in the surroundings of the place, before we were saluted by a loud howl from the doorway, and the Mère Fromard rushed forward, and, seizing Tessie's hands, began explaining in her Wallon *patois* how her good Guillaume had gone to his rest but half an hour before, and she was left a lonely widow, with five poor children to battle for in this hard world alone.

Before we knew what was going to happen to us, we had been dragged into the presence of the defunct Guillaume, who already lay shrouded and stretched out on two planks in a corner of the general sitting-room, whilst his younger children played on the ground beside him, and one or two fowls, more inquisitive or hungry than the rest, were picking up the crumbs of potato that had fallen on the brick floor.

As we entered the house and her eye fell upon the corpse, I saw Tessie's face turn as white as death itself. Not knowing how far she was accustomed to such scenes, I wanted to draw her back again; but Madame Fromard insisted upon her going forward.

'Why should she not see him?' she exclaimed; 'she has watched him dying for months past; 'for the want of bread, mamselle, the bread it was his right to have had, and which would have saved him maybe from the grave this day. And she was not afraid then—neither she nor Monsieur le Curé; and now that he is silent for ever—that he can no longer speak and ask for his own—why should she be afraid to look on his face, unless it be to remember how it has come to be so still and so silent?'

The woman seemed as if she had gone out of her senses, as she pushed us to the very feet of the corpse and snatched the covering from off its face.

'Look at him,' she said loudly, 'and remember that he died from want! Sixty—a hundred francs would have saved him, mamselle; and he was owed five hundred and fifty, but couldn't get it. Ah, Guillaume! husband of my youth! father of my children! thou art gone to the judgment-seat of God, to arrange a fearful reckoning for them that sent thee there so long before thy time.'

'Madame! madame!' said Tessie, who, unaccountably to me, had begun to sob in unison with Mère Fromard. 'Don't speak like that—pray don't! We have all felt for you so much, and papa sent you this in hopes it might be of use to poor Guillaume' (putting something timidly into the woman's hand); 'and he would have done more if he could; you know he would, madame.'

Mère Fromard unclasped her hand and displayed a five-franc piece, then, with sudden energy, sent it spinning to the other end of the brick floor.

'A five-franc piece!' she cried scornfully; 'a five-franc piece, when he owes him five hundred and fifty. Oh! it is no use to shake your head at me and cry, mamselle. The time is past for that! I have been very patient for a long, long time, but I didn't think it would end like this. I thought my poor Guillaume would have got up again to see after that which was his—all his little savings—all the *dot* I brought him at our marriage of two hundred francs—lent in an evil moment and never returned again—whilst he dies for want of proper warmth and nourishment.'

Madame Fromard had been running on in her usually (to me) incomprehensible dialect, but I gathered enough of her discourse to-day to be curious to learn more.

'*Who* has been so wicked as to defraud your family like this?' I asked.

'No! no! do not say it!' cried Tessie, vehemently, as she seized Mère Fromard's hand and kissed it.

But the woman flung hers away. She seemed to have changed to-day from a patient sufferer into a demon.

'I *will* say it!' she exclaimed. 'Are his evil deeds always to be covered up with excuses and promises and fair words? It is the Curé Anglais, mamselle,' she continued, turning to me. 'It is Monsieur Lovett who borrowed my poor Guillaume's savings, two, three, five years ago, and has been promising, promising, promising ever since to pay us back again, but never more than a few sous at a time. Who would have doubted him, mamselle, a man so good-intentioned, so benevolent, so charitable to the poor! We thought our money was safer than in a bank. We had lent it to the *Bon Dieu* to accommodate His servant. It was bound to come back with blessings upon us, and it has come with *that*,' she said pathetically, pointing to her dead husband, 'with a five-franc piece and a corpse! Bah! there can be no heaven, or such things would not be allowed.'

'Is this *possible?*' I said, in a tone of the greatest amazement. 'Tessie! she must have gone out of her mind. She cannot know what she is saying!'

But this insinuation only stimulated Madame Fromard to make her meaning plainer.

'*Possible!*' she screamed, 'is it possible that Monsieur le Curé owes money all over St. Pucelle and Rille—that there is not a tradesman who has not his name down for a larger sum than he will ever pay whilst living, and that when he dies they will swoop down upon his carcass like birds of prey, to see which can tear it to pieces first! *Bon Dieu!* Mamselle is not so foolish as she would make herself to be! She *must* know that if it were not for the Prince Francius von Ritzburg, Monsieur le Curé would have been in prison years ago, and that it is only because of his holy profession he is allowed to walk free about the streets of St. Pucelle! But the day will come—the day will come when my poor Guillaume shall be avenged of his death!'

We could do the raving woman no good, and Tessie was crying so bitterly by this time, that I drew her quickly out of the cottage, and led her to a secluded part of the encircling country where she could sit down and weep in privacy. I did not know what to say to her. If this horrid story were untrue, why did she not deny it—why did she sit there with her face buried in her hands and cry as if her heart would break? And if it were *true*, as I too much feared it must be, what comfort could I give her? For I felt that I would rather have died myself than have heard such words spoken of *my* father, and been unable to refute them.

I sat by her side in silence, waiting until she should speak to me. The first words she said were confirmatory of my fears.

'Don't tell Ange of this—pray don't tell her, Hilda! She knows nothing of it all. It would break her heart!'

'It is true then, Tessie?'

She did not answer me except by another convulsive sob.

'I don't think it is all his fault,' she said presently; 'we have been so very poor, you see, and debts accumulate so fast, it seems impossible to gain ground again when once you have lost it. And I know that his liabilities have weighed heavily upon poor papa's mind, this one to poor Guillaume especially. We have always been friendly with them, and had our eggs of them for that reason, but what could papa do? Five hundred and fifty francs! it is a positive fortune. We shall never be able to pay it!'

'Meanwhile they starve,' I said bitterly.

'Oh, Hilda! don't be hard. You don't know how terribly I feel it. The Prince has been very kind to us, and sometimes I have thought I would beg my way to the Court and tell him all about it, and see if he would help us to pay off papa's debts.'

'It would be of no use, Tessie. When men have once got into the habit of debt and learned to look upon it with indifference, they are past cure. He would only start clear, to get into debt again.'

'I have always pitied him so,' continued Tessie, in a low voice, 'because he used to live in such different style, you know, with every comfort about him, and it must have been such a dreadful trial to come down to his present life. And I have thought, sometimes, that he had such a fresh innocent sort of mind, he really did not think how fast money went, nor what trouble he was laying up for himself and us in the future. Sometimes I hardly believe he realises it now. He seems so happy and contented and cheerful under it all.'

I could not say anything to her either in acquiescence or by way of consolation. I thought of the innocent ingenuous Harold Skimpole in 'Bleak House,' who cheated everybody, and was too childlike to understand what he was doing, and I felt nothing but contempt and disgust for my reverend guardian. I understood now the farce he had been playing with regard to my little allowance, and felt sure that unless some desperate effort were made on my behalf, I should never see any of it at all.

'You will not tell Ange?' reiterated Tessie, pleadingly.

'No, Tessie! certainly not, since you desire it. But do you think it possible she does not guess the state of affairs?'

'Oh, I am *sure* she does not. It would kill Ange to think papa one whit less perfect than she does. You don't know how she loves him, Hilda. Even Madame Marmoret, who is very spiteful sometimes against poor papa in my presence, has never mentioned a word about him to Ange, because she says she is sure she will never smile again if she once knows it.'

'I suppose your father owes Madame Marmoret money also, then,' I said bluntly.

I was resolved, now I had ascertained so much, to hear the whole of it. It was best to see the extent of the danger which I ran.

'Yes,' replied Tessie, hesitatingly, 'and her wages must have fallen a long way behind also. Poor Madame has had much to try her, and I do not wonder that sometimes she feels a little sore and angry. Ange is not always so patient with her as she might be. She does not know the reason as I do.'

'Why does Madame dislike me so much, Tessie?'

'I don't think she dislikes you personally, but she thought your coming to live with us would be an extra expense and increase papa's debts, I suppose. She knows that the goodness of papa's heart often overbalances the greatness of his mind.'

'But is she not aware, then, that I pay your father a hundred a year for my board and lodging?'

Tessie looked round at me with a face of astonishment.

'Hilda! is that so?' she demanded.

'Of course it is so! Have you not been told it before?'

'Never!'

'And what did you suppose, then? That I was living on your father's charity?'

'Oh, dear Hilda!' cried the girl, embracing me warmly. 'We should never have called it by a name like that! Ange and I thought that as you were the child of one of papa's dearest friends, it was the most natural thing in the world that when you were orphaned you should come to live with us and be our sister. We never asked if you had money or not. Our only anxiety was that you should love us.'

'It is true nevertheless, dear Tessie. My noble income consists of one hundred and fifty pounds a year, and of that Mr. Lovett agreed with Mr. Warrington, my solicitor, to allow me fifty pounds for my private expenses, and to retain the remainder as payment for my board and lodging in St. Pucelle.'

'And—and—have you had your allowance, Hilda?' asked Tessie, anxiously.

'No, dear, I have not, I am sorry to say. After much persuasion, your father has given me twenty-five francs to repay Mrs. Carolus for Ange's earrings, but for the rest of my pocket-money I expect I may do what is vulgarly termed *whistle*.'

She flung herself in my arms in a fresh burst of tears.

'Oh, Hilda! don't love Ange and me less because of this. We have grown so fond of you. We feel just as if you were our sister. Don't turn against us—it isn't our fault, dear—we would cut off our right hands to serve you if we could.'

I assured her again and again that I would never be less her friend and her sister's friend than I was at that moment.

'I love you too, Tessie—rest sure of that, and we will fight this great trouble out together if we can. I will not turn against you, nor will I forsake you. My lot has not been so unexpectedly cast here without some good reason, and I should feel like a coward if I could run away just as I have heard all, and leave you and Ange to cope with this misery by yourselves.'

'But remember, she knows nothing,' said Tessie, with the same anxious tone as before.

'I do remember it,' I answered, and I thought at the same moment, that it was a great pity the little maid had been kept in such ignorance. It was blissful ignorance in the present, but if the awakening came suddenly, it might be very terrible in the future.

But I felt that by the foregoing conversation I had bound myself to cleave to the fortunes of these girls until I could do them no future good. Poor patient Tessie, carrying her heavy burthen of disgrace alone, and lighthearted, unconscious Ange, dancing along the path of life as gaily as if it were all flowers and hid no secret mine which might explode at any moment and devastate her whole young, fresh existence : I could not tell which of the two I loved the more, nor which I could have the heart to forsake the sooner.

CHAPTER XIX.

CHARLIE.

MY compact with Tessie did not, however, preclude one thing, and that was the taking advice of my friends on the state of my affairs. With the state of those of other people I had nothing to do. But I could not decide whether to write to Mr. Warrington or Mrs. Sandilands. The solicitor was, of course, the most proper person to consult on the subject, but it appeared to be such a formidable proceeding to make a regular complaint to him, and I dreaded its entailing legal inquiries, and perhaps a complete estrangement between myself and the Lovetts. And, in that case, what would become of my promise of fidelity to Tessie? Mrs. Sandilands, on the other hand, although only a woman, had thorough good sense, and had managed all her own money affairs since her husband's death, and might be able to give me some hints by which to manage my guardian and obviate the necessity of calling in professional assistance.

So the day after I had taken that walk with Tessie, I sat down to write to Mrs. Sandilands. It was always a pleasure to me to take up the pen to address my old friend. Thoughts of the pretty countrified home which we had shared together, and of the many happy hours we had passed in each other's society, used to flow in upon me as I wielded it, and sometimes I was almost tempted to regret I had been so cold-hearted as to be unable to claim the title of daughter so warmly offered to me. What a cheerful, comfortable fireside theirs was! I could imagine no brighter lot for some poor lonely unloved orphan than to be welcomed to the bosom of the Sandilands family—for any orphan, that is to say, except Hilda Marsh. The bright-eyed helpful girls and the boisterous healthy boys, with their rosy cheeks and young clear voices—I fancied I could see them at that moment gathered round the dinner-table.

Nellie and Connie and Flo helping their mother to carve, whilst Bell, the spoilt baby of the family, albeit ten years old, was seated at Mrs. Sandilands' elbow, ready to grab at anything that came within her reach; and the boys' eyes were glistening at the sight of pudding, and their mouths, luckily for all those concerned, too full to permit them to make much noise.

Poor Charlie would not be present at that early meal. He always took his lunch in town, and relied on his mother looking after his creature comforts at tea-time.

Poor Charlie! I always thought of his name with that prefix, though I used to tell myself it was very ridiculous to do so; and that if he had inherited any of his mother's practical good sense, he must have seen, even before I had left Norwood, that the proposal he had made to me was one that, under any circumstances, I could never have entertained.

It was not his paltry income, nor the small chance he had of increasing it. If I loved a man, I felt that I could work for him, cooking dinners or scrubbing floors every day of my life, and be happier so, a great deal, than unloved and alone. But the one I slaved for must be superior to me. And poor Charlie was not. There was no conceit in saying so—it was the veritable fact. He was a dear good old boy, and I felt sure that some day he would make some woman very happy indeed; but it could never be myself.

Our natures didn't coalesce. I was too clear-sighted concerning him for any chance to remain of my friendship ripening into love. I saw so much too plainly that his hair was sandy and his moustaches nearly red, and that he had no idea of argument and was uncomfortable in society, and appeared as though he had been unused to it.

Still I wished he had written to me. During the three months I had spent in St. Pucelle, though Mrs. Sandilands had sent me a letter almost every week, she had never enclosed more than a message from her son; and I was curious about him, as all women are about their lovers, and wanted to find out if he had forgotten me, or was still silly enough to fret because I would not settle down in the bosom of his family as Mrs. Sandilands the Second.

What induced me to think about him so much that morning I do not know; but amongst my psychological studies, I have often observed the curious manner in which coming events often cast their shadow on the brain. Anyway, I was still sitting over that sheet of paper, nibbling my pen, and thinking of Charlie, when some one knocked at my bedroom door.

'All right!' I called out, imagining it to be a summons to *goûter*. 'I'm very glad it's ready, for I'm as hungry as I can be.'

'But no,' replied Ange's merry voice, in French, 'you are an hour out of your reckoning, Hilda: it is only half-past eleven. I come to tell you that somebody is waiting for you in the *salle*.'

'Somebody! That means that old bore Miss Markham, or her bosom friend Mrs. Carolus. No, thank you, *petite* Ange! I am writing a letter, and cannot be disturbed. Say you could see me nowhere. That will be quite true.'

'But supposing it is not Miss Markham or Mrs. Carolus! Suppose it is a gentleman, Hilda!'

My thoughts flew at once to Monsieur de Nesselrode, and my cheeks flamed like fire. That was because, since he had left off spending his evenings at our house, I had always felt a degree of guilty fear respecting him, under the idea that Mr. Lovett would some day question him too closely concerning his defalcation, and draw from him, perhaps against his will, a relation of the circumstances under which he had come to the determination to give up cards.

I felt the awkward position that in such a case I should be placed in: of how impossible it would be for me to explain to my trustee that I had had Tessie's welfare at heart, more than that of the Baron, in persuading him to give up play, and that in going against the father's wishes I had been doing my very best for the daughter. Mr. Lovett would say, and naturally think, that he knew what would secure his child's happiness better than myself, and I had no right to interfere. It would be very difficult to convince him that, beyond the pity which all right-minded people must feel to see a fellow-creature throwing away his chances of happiness in this world, I had had no motive in advising the Baron to secure his. So that the name of De Nesselrode was rather a bugbear to me at that time; and I always felt my best safety lay in being present, if possible, at his interviews with Mr. Lovett.

So, on hearing Ange's last piece of intelligence, I threw my half-finished letter into my blotting-case, and smoothed my hair before the looking-glass.

'You need not wait, Ange. I will be down directly!' I exclaimed.

'Ah, I thought *that* would bring you, mademoiselle!' she called out with such a merry laugh, as she ran down the corridor, that I stopped short with the brush in my hand, to consider whether *petite* Ange had not been having a little amusement at my expense, and I should find myself in the arms of Mrs. Carolus after all. However, I resolved to go and see.

I followed her so quickly, that I caught her up in our little sitting-room, tying back her hair with a black ribbon.

'He's such a *nice* young man!' she said demurely; 'and Tessie is making such violent love to him already!'

'Ange, what a goose you are! I know it is only the Baron!'

'Well, go and see for yourself. If it is the Baron, he has dyed his hair!'

I opened the door of the *salle* quietly and looked in. No, it was decidedly not the Baron. That light-grey tweed suit and stuck-up collar never belonged to anyone but an Englishman.

Ah, I had it now! It was my young friend of the steamboat

—Mr. Charteris's cousin, Frederick Stephenson. I advanced quickly to bid him welcome. He turned round, and proved to be—Charlie Sandilands!

Oh, I *was* so pleased to see him! All the blood in my body, I verily believe, rushed to my face as I darted forward with both hands outstretched to grasp his.

'Charlie!' I exclaimed eagerly. 'Oh, Charlie, my dear old boy! wherever did you spring from?'

'I thought you would be surprised to see me, Hilda,' he replied, with his eyes fixed upon my countenance; 'but I couldn't help coming—I couldn't, upon my word! I've got my annual leave, you see; and I did want to see you so much, that I put off taking it until I could spend it in St. Pucelle.'

'Oh, how good of you, Charlie! And how long will you be here?'

'Nearly a month, Hilda, unless you are sick of me before that time—in which case I shall go back to Norwood.'

'Sick of you? That's very likely! Why, it's like old times to see your face again! What jolly days we will have together! I am so glad you came before the fine weather was over. Isn't it a lovely place! And where are you staying, Charlie?'

In the gladness of my heart at meeting the boy again, I had been holding his hands all this time; but now, perceiving that Mr. Charteris was lounging in one of the window seats, smoking, and regarding my ebullitions of delight, as I thought, with rather a contemptuous air, I dropped them as if they had been hot coals, and sat down on a chair close by.

'I have put up at the Hôtel d'Etoile,' said Charlie.

His pronunciation was delicious—something to make one scream by-and-by; but at that moment he might have stood on his head, and I should have regarded him gravely, so eager was I for news from my dear old home.

'That is all right. I am glad you have chosen the Etoile. It is nearer us than the Cloche. Fancy, I was just writing a letter to your dear mother, and thinking so much of you, Charlie, and all the others, when they knocked at my door to tell me you were here! I suppose you have been introduced to Miss Lovett?'

'Yes, Mr. Charteris was good enough to do so. I was surprised to see Charteris here, too, Hilda. It is quite a meeting of the clans! What an age it seems since he was at Norwood!'

Then I remembered that these two must have met at that period, though Charlie had been such a mere lad, that Mr. Charteris and I had doubtless considered that he had neither eyes nor ears. The recollection, however, of what I had told him of my early disappointment came back so vividly upon my mind, that I flushed scarlet and hated myself for so flushing, for fear lest the one man should interpret my change of countenance as regret for our lost intimacy, and the other accept it as a clue to the mysterious history I had partly confided to him. But Charlie appeared to see no connection at all in the two circumstances.

'Mr. Charteris had quite forgotten me,' he went on, 'but I suppose that is not surprising. Hair upon one's face makes such a difference.' (Charlie's moustaches resembled the down on an apple-tart, and had to be caught sideways to be seen at all.) 'But I knew him at once. He is not the least altered since he was at Norwood. Is he, Hilda?'

'Men alter less at Mr. Charteris's age than they do at yours, Charlie. But tell me about your mother, and your brothers and sisters. I wish you could have brought your dear mother with you. And how are Nellie and Connie and Flo and little Bell? It seems years instead of months since I saw them all.'

'Oh, they're flourishing, Hilda, and going on just as usual. Nell's been worrying mother ever since you left to send her to a continental school, but I don't think she'll get her way. Mother's much too timid to let anyone of them out of her sight.'

'There are no young ladies' schools in St. Pucelle, or I should try and persuade Mrs. Sandilands to send Nell here—and I'd look after her! It is so charming to see any one from the old country when you are exiled in a foreign land.'

'One would imagine, to hear you talk, Miss Marsh,' interposed Mr. Charteris, 'and to see the rapture with which you welcome your friends from England, that you had been expatriated for a lifetime, instead of three months.'

He spoke 'nastily' to me, and he meant me to take it so. I could almost have thought, from the expression of his voice, that he was annoyed at witnessing the friendly terms on which I was with Charlie Sandilands. But that would have been too ridiculous, under the circumstances. However, I could not help giving him a *quid pro quo.*

'I am not in the habit of forgetting my friends, Mr. Charteris. And if an absence of three months can make me so glad to meet them again, it is only a proof that I have found none better to take their places in the interim.'

He bit his lip and went on smoking, whilst I turned my attention again to Charlie, and continued my catechism of his home affairs.

It was strange that during the three weeks Cave Charteris and I had spent under the same roof, not a word nor a hint had been exchanged between us relating to our former intimacy. That he had entirely forgotten it I could not believe ; neither could he credit me with so short a memory. On the contrary, his studied avoidance of the subject convinced me that he remembered only too well, although it was convenient to attribute his reticence to his fear of hurting my feelings by reviving thoughts of my lost mother. At the same time he never appeared quite at his ease when in my presence, and as he reminded me painfully of a time of weakness and suffering which I had lived to be very much ashamed of, we had mutually avoided each other as much as possible. I was surprised, therefore, to see that he condescended to take any notice of my interest in Charlie Sandilands.

'Have you had luncheon yet, Charlie?' I went on, with my back turned to Mr. Charteris.

'No, Hilda. They told me at the hotel it was served at one.'

'Well, go and get it then, and come back to take a walk with me.'

'I shall be delighted!'

'Will not Mr. Sandilands stay and take some *goûter* with us, Hilda? Papa will be in directly,' interposed Tessie.

'*No!*' I said decidedly. 'He had better go back to his hotel.' I had no idea of a friend of mine breaking bread in Mr. Lovett's house, whilst I could prevent it. The Sandilands had always been honest to the core. Let Charlie go and eat bread that had been paid for! I felt sure his mother would have said the same.

'Call for me at two o'clock,' I said in parting. 'I will take you such a lovely walk as you have never seen before, right up the hill to the forest of Piron.'

'Past the Château des Roses!' said Tessie, mischievously.

Ah! how she would have altered her tone, had she known *why* I took any interest in the Château des Roses or its master!

'Tessie, how can you!' I cried, with burning cheeks. 'Now, I shall take Mr. Sandilands in exactly the opposite direction, over the trout stream and through the valley of Artois!'

'But I saw that as I came in the diligence yesterday,' said Charlie.

'Then there are a dozen other walks, all prettier than the one I first mentioned, for me to introduce you to. But I want to take you right away from the town to some place where we can talk privately of all that has happened since we last met.'

'In three months!' sneered Cave Charteris.

When I say he 'sneered,' I mean that he spoke the words unpleasantly, and as though he would have liked to laugh, had he dared, at what I said.

'And why not?' I returned. 'A great deal of consequence may occur in that time. It is long enough to make or mar a life; why should I not find sufficient has happened in it to interest my friend for the length of a walk?'

'Everything that happens to you is of interest to me, Hilda,' exclaimed Charlie, with boyish fervour.

'I knew that before I spoke! Mr. Charteris must have few friends worthy the name if he did not know it also!'

'I am not so fortunate as Miss Marsh,' replied that gentleman. 'No one takes such an interest in me.'

'Not those at home?' remarked Ange, pitifully. The little maid had crept into the *salle* a few minutes after myself. Charteris turned and looked searchingly into her blushing face.

'No, I am afraid not even "those at home," Miss Lovett. But how can I expect it? I am not Miss Hilda Marsh.'

'Even I have been forgotten by those I thought my friends,' I remarked quietly.

'But never by my mother nor me,' said Charlie, in an eager tone.

'I know that, Charlie, without your telling me. But now go back to the hotel and get your *goûter*, and I will be ready for walking on your return.'

'How I wish some one would take me for a walk,' observed Mr. Charteris, with a professional sigh, as Charlie disappeared. *Petite* Ange said nothing, but she sighed also.

CHAPTER XX.

A LITTLE QUARREL.

St. Pucelle never looked more beautiful than it did on the day that I took that walk with Charlie Sandilands. The summer glories, yet unfaded, had been overtaken by those of autumn, and the rich clusters of purple grapes that hung upon the walls of my guardian's house made a brilliant contrast to the scarlet and rose-coloured geraniums that still bloomed luxuriantly on the window-sills. The purple heather reigned alone upon the hill-side, but ferns of various sorts were arching their graceful fronds above it, and the merry brown hares were leaping amongst the brushwood and filling the place with life. As I led Charlie up the hill (for I would not let Tessie's silly remark deter me from showing him the glorious expanse of scenery to be gained from the summit) I pointed out the beauties of the country to him with so much interest as to excite the remark that I appeared entirely to have forgotten poor old Norwood in my new love for St. Pucelle.

This was exactly the sort of thing I had hoped Charlie would say to me, for I had had two reasons in inviting him to a confidential interview: one was to ask his advice about writing to Mr. Warrington; the other to find out if he intended to be sensible during his stay in our neighbourhood, and permit me to enjoy his company without being annoyed by his sentimentality. So I answered briskly:

'I never cared for Norwood itself, you know, Charlie, and you would scarcely expect me to get up an enthusiastic admiration for a suburb of London, composed of bricks and mortar and stunted trees. Its recollections are sacred to me, because my dear mother lies there, but that is all.'

'I was sure that coming abroad would give you a distaste for all the old things,' he said, in a desponding manner.

'Don't talk rubbish, Charlie! You were sure of no such thing! If you ask me if I was happy at Norwood, I answer "*yes*" most fervently. If you ask me if I liked the place as a residence, I answer, as fervently, "*no*." I should have been happy with my mother in St. Giles's; but I should not have admired the locality.'

'Ah well! Let us return to St. Pucelle,' he said, with a sigh.

'No! I refuse to return to St. Pucelle until I have spoken a few words to you. Do you mean to enjoy your holiday here, Charlie, and to let me enjoy it, or not?'

'I don't understand what you're driving at.'

'I'm driving at you, or rather at that receptacle for nonsense you call your brain. Now, you know I am very fond of you, Charlie, and have been for years. You are so associated with my darling mother, that you seem like a link with the past to me; and I should like to treat you like a younger brother, and to feel that you looked upon me as a sister. But that can never be whilst you attempt to stuff any of your sentiment down my throat.'

'Really, Hilda——'

'Really, Charlie, please to hear me out first, and have your say afterwards. If I thought that what you told me at Norwood proceeded from a feeling such as men conceive in their maturity, and preserve for their whole lives, I should not dare broach the subject to you again. But I am sure it did not.'

'You imagine, in fact, that I am such a *boy*,' with a withering accent on the word, 'that I am incapable of a lasting passion.'

'Just so! That is just what I do think; at least, I am sure the fancy you took for me was born entirely of association and compassion.'

'I confess I do not follow you.'

'Oh yes, you do! There are several kinds of love, Charlie, but only one is the right one with which to enter upon a partnership for life. You had known me for so long: you had become so *used* to me, in fact, that when you thought of our separation, and under such melancholy circumstances, the pain seemed too hard to bear, and your mind flew to the only means by which you could have kept me with you. I have often and often thought of it since, and I am sure I am right. It was very good and sweet and true of you, Charlie, and I love you the better for it, but you should thank God I was more clear-sighted than yourself, for we should have been a very miserable couple.'

'Do you think so, Hilda?'

'I am *sure* of it! My dear boy, you are just at that age when men think they can live happily with any woman who is young and passably good-tempered and passably good-looking. But the daily companionship of a married life is a terrible crucible through which to pass the affections, and only the true ore will bear the test of it.'

'I suppose you have found the "true ore" in St. Pucelle,' he grumbled.

'Don't be impudent, Charlie! Every word you say convinces me more and more of the truth of my conviction. Now do be reasonable, my dear child——'

'I won't be called your "dear child."'

'My dear boy, then.'

'Nor your "dear boy."'

'What then, my dear Mr. Sandilands? Oh, you baby! If you were fifty-two instead of twenty-two, you would be skipping with pleasure at being called a child. However, I will try not to hurt your feelings again. I won't call you "dear" at all.'

'No, Hilda! don't say that.'

'Confess, then, that you made a mistake the other day at Norwood, and that I, with my independent spirit and intolerance of control, would never have made you happy in the way you wished me to do.'

'I will confess no such thing!'

'But your heart is not broken, Charlie. Come!' I said, looking round into his face.

He caught my glance and smiled.

'Eureka!' I exclaimed; 'I knew I should get at the truth at last.'

'Well! of course it's not *broken*,' he replied, in a foolish, half-shamed manner; 'or I shouldn't be walking here, but you made me very miserable, you know, Hilda! I am sure I hardly ate anything for a month after you left. But you had said it was of no use, and you never should change your mind, and so I tried to make the best of it. A man cannot go on crying over spilt milk for ever, can he?'

'Of course not,' I said energetically; 'and it is so brave and nice of you to tell me the truth, Charlie. It makes me feel we shall be such real friends henceforward. And I want your friendship so much. I should have been unhappy to think that you had put it out of my power to confide in you; for things are not quite so straight here as they ought to be.'

'What! with the Lovetts? Aren't they kind to you?'

'The girls are sweetness itself. I never had more lovable companions.'

'The one I saw first seemed very jolly; the pretty one, I mean!'

'What, Tessie? the one with fair hair?'

'Yes!'

'Oh! we call little Ange the beauty! Her face is perfectly lovely when you look into it.'

'I didn't see so much of her. She kept right behind her sister. But Miss Lovett appeared the prettiest girl I had ever seen, to me—except yourself, Hilda, of course,' added Charlie, pulling himself up with a sudden recollection of the proprieties.

I laughed so heartily that I entirely discomposed him.

'Oh, Charlie! you have not half learned your lesson yet! I know I'm a very pretty girl, because you've so often told me so;

but I do not expect nor wish that you should never meet somebody you think much better-looking than myself. And Tessie Lovett and I are formed upon two such entirely opposite models! How could you think my wounded vanity would require that little postscript of yours as salve?'

'I'll tell you what I *do* think, Hilda,' said Charlie, with sudden bluntness, 'and that is, that you are the most honest and straightforward woman I've ever known; and I'm sure the man who gets you will be an out-and-out lucky fellow, whoever he may be.'

'Well, never mind him, Charlie; he has not appeared upon the scene as yet, so we can go on very well without him. Tessie has, as you say, a very sweet and pretty face, and the goodness of her heart shines through her eyes and makes it beautiful. She has a great deal of trouble and anxiety to bear, and she bears it with the utmost meekness and patience. I have a great affection for her, and I hope I shall live to see her the wife of some good man whose love will make up for the sorrows of her youth. And as this brings me to the very point on which I want to consult you, Charlie, suppose we sit down on this bank whilst I tell you my difficulties.'

We had reached the Calvary now, the very place where I had first met the Mère Fromard, and were as much alone and more secure from listeners than if we had been shut up within four walls. So I commenced to recount the perplexity in which I found myself with regard to money—the attempts I had made to procure it, and the failures that had succeeded them—and ended by asking him to tell me whether it would be advisable to communicate with Mr. Warrington on the subject, or to wait and see what time might bring me.

I had called Charlie Sandilands a 'baby,' and in some things a young man in love, or supposing himself to be so, is a very great baby compared to an energetic and helpful woman with all her wits about her. Yet I knew when it came to a question of business, *pur et simple*, that his decision would be worth twenty of mine, being less likely to be actuated by any other feeling than a desire to see justice done to his friend. His advice was that I should write without any delay to Mr. Warrington, and tell him all I knew.

'Who had the management of your mother's affairs during her lifetime, Hilda?'

'Mr. Lovett entirely, I believe; at least, you see it was on this wise, Charlie. My mother had a small pension granted to her by Government, on account of my father's scientific discoveries being adopted by the nation, but that died with her. The only real property my father left behind him consists of shares in a tea-raising company in the Himalayas, producing annually one hundred and fifty pounds, and that is the money for which Mr. Lovett is still trustee for me.'

'But there should be two trustees, Hilda.'

'There were two, I think; but the other one died, and mamma never appointed a successor to him. Mr. Warrington mentioned something about it to me, I remember, but I forgot it again. Will you be the other trustee, Charlie?'

'I should like to be so very much, but I cannot say if I am fitted for such a post. You had better ask Warrington. Used Mr. Lovett to send your mamma the interest of these shares regularly?'

'I don't think he did, of late years; but it always came eventually, or we should not have been able to live. It seems very strange, though, that now he should be unable to lay his hand on a few pounds for me, does it not?'

'I don't like it at all, Hilda, and I wish you would write to Warrington about it by this night's post.'

'Suppose my letter should bring him over here?'

'All the better, if it is necessary! You may be sure he will not come unless he considers it so.'

'I shall tell him with twice the confidence now that I have had your advice, Charlie. I was so very undecided whether to write to him or your mother. In fact, I had begun a letter to Mrs. Sandilands when you arrived.'

'Mother couldn't have advised you on her own responsibility. It isn't a matter for a woman's decision—nor for a man's, except he be a lawyer. I hope Warrington may ask you to sell out your shares and invest them in something else. I don't like tea; it's so very uncertain. A rainy season—or a dry one—might deprive you of half your income.'

'That would be awkward! But I confess to an entire and appalling ignorance concerning shares and selling out and all that kind of thing. I am afraid I did not even know where the money came from till Mr. Warrington told me.'

'That is not like your usual sense, Hilda; and since it is all you have to depend upon, I should think the sooner you made yourself acquainted with its source and securities the better.'

'Yes, I feel I have been foolish. There is another thing, Charlie. Do you think I could get my money into my own hands? Mr. Warrington promised me I should be quite independent, and I should feel so much more so if I paid Mr. Lovett what we agreed upon, instead of having it kept back from me like a child.'

'I should say it would be not only feasible but right that you should manage your own income. I don't think you have been treated at all fairly, Hilda, and I have not conceived a very high idea of your reverend guardian in consequence.'

'You had better wait till you see him and judge for yourself, Charlie. You know the old adage, "What is one man's meat is another man's poison." I may have been viewing the old gentleman through distorted lenses. But I fear the rosiest glasses would never make him look a saint to me again.'

'Who's that foreign-looking chap staring at you, Hilda?' interposed Charlie, abruptly.

I followed his glance and encountered the graceful form of the Baron de Nesselrode. He was attired in a velveteen shooting-suit of a golden-brown hue; had a game-bag slung across his shoulder, and carried a gun in his hand. Following at his heels were several dogs, amongst which the two gaunt wolf-hounds that we had seen at the château contributed to form a most picturesque group.

As the Baron met my gaze, he smiled slightly, lifted his *sombrero*, and with a low bow passed on his way. But not before I had caught the look of decided dissatisfaction he threw towards my companion, who was sitting very close to me upon the bank. The look annoyed me, though I scarcely knew why. I certainly did not wish Monsieur de Nesselrode nor anybody else in St. Pucelle to think I was indulging in a flirtation with Charlie Sandilands, but at the same time I liked him too well to see any slight cast upon him without inwardly resenting it. So a blight fell on my spirits as the Baron passed out of sight.

'Who is he? do you know him?' asked Charlie, as soon as we were alone again.

'Of course I know him, or I should not have returned his bow. That is the Baron de Nesselrode—a great friend of all the Lovetts—and a particular one of Tessie's.'

'A particular friend of Miss Lovett's!' repeated my companion. 'How do you mean?'

'I mean what I say; and I hope and think that at some future time he will be more than a friend to her. They would make a charming couple, for he is so thoroughly well-bred and courtier-like, and she has been reared in the atmosphere of a Court, although her father is now too poor to permit them to mix in society.'

'Do you mean that he'll marry her?' demanded Charlie, who was rather dull of comprehension.

'What else do you suppose I could mean? Nothing is settled, remember; but the Baron wants a wife terribly, and Tessie is so sweet, I think she would love anybody who was kind to her.'

'Well, I should have thought she could do a deal better than that for herself.'

This disparaging remark was a signal-match for my bad temper, and I fired up immediately.

'What a commonplace manner you have of expressing your ideas, Charlie. Besides, you do not know what you're talking about. Monsieur de Nesselrode belongs to one of the first and oldest families of France. His ancestors have been barons by feudal right ever since the days of Charlemagne; and if it were not that he had been a little wild and careless of his money, you would not have seen him in a place like St. Pucelle at all. The Château des Roses, which he occupies here, is the least important portion of his estates. He possesses land in Switzerland, and Normandy, and Anjou, and is the owner of extensive house property in Paris. The De Nesselrodes have been attached to the King's service ever since one of their ancestors saved a royal life. I believe you would not find better blood in all France than runs in the veins of the gentleman who has just passed us.'

'Well, you seem to know all about him, at any rate, Hilda,' replied Charlie, when want of breath compelled me to stop my running commentary on the Baron's pedigree. 'I dare say it's all true, but his title and estates don't alter my opinion one bit. I should still think Miss Lovett a great deal too good for him.'

'But why? He is very handsome and accomplished, and you know nothing against his character?'

'He's a Frenchman! that's quite enough for me,' said Charlie, with beautiful British depreciation of everybody who did not belong to the same nation as himself. 'And an English girl must be too good for him, if he's a lord or a costermonger.'

'What absurd prejudice!' I replied, with a curling lip; 'and I should have credited you with more good taste than to speak of a noble of France in that way.'

'Noble of fiddlesticks! Does he ever wash himself, that's the question, Hilda? I don't believe any of these foreigners do.'

'Why don't you call him a "frog" at once, or a "Johnny Crapeau"?' I returned witheringly. 'It would be about as brilliant and as much in accordance with modern enlightenment as what you are saying now. I declare you put me out of all patience. And to think, too, that a man like Armand de Nesselrode should have been laid open, by his own folly, to the animadversions of a—a—Somerset House clerk!'

'Hullo, Hilda! are you really angry with me? Why, what is this fellow to you, even if he should be going to marry the pretty Miss Lovett?'

'Tessie is my friend, Charlie, and if she ever becomes the Baronne de Nesselrode, her husband will be my friend also. You can judge for yourself, then, if it is very pleasant for me to sit by and hear you talk in that way of him.'

'You must have enough to do if you take up the cudgels for all your friends' friends after this fashion. However, I am very sorry if I have offended you, Hilda, and I will try and believe that your fine Baron *does* wash himself, if it pleases you I should do so.'

'Please not to mention the subject again; it disgusts me,' I said loftily, as I rose from my seat and commenced to descend the hill.

Poor Charlie walked by my side in silence till we had got nearly half-way home, when he said:

'You're not cross with me still, are you, Hilda?'

'I have no right to be cross, but you disappoint me. Are these old prejudices never to be done away with, and the two finest nations in the world to meet on terms of perfect amity and mutual esteem? The greater intellects of earth have abandoned them long since, and it is lowering to one's conceptions of human generosity to find they still linger in the breasts of one's intimate friends. Why, I suppose, in the whole course of your life, you have never associated with so intellectual and highly-bred a man as Monsieur de Nesselrode; indeed, I am *sure* you have not. Men like himself are not to be met with in the purlieus of Somerset House, or amongst the "snobbery" of London suburbs. And yet you think you have a right to laugh at him, simply because he is not an Englishman. You make me hate British patriotism! Displayed in this fashion, it is vulgar, offensive, coarse! You would receive more politeness and appreciation yourself from the commonest labourer you met on these country roads than you have accorded to-day to Monsieur de Nesselrode.'

'Hilda, I'm awfully sorry! I had no idea you thought so much of this chap as all that.'

This insinuation nettled me still further.

'I wish to goodness you wouldn't call him a "chap"—your cockneyisms grate on my ears like a file,' I said angrily. 'Please to remember that for the last three months I have been unused to hear the elegancies of the English language.'

This put a summary end to all conversation between us until we reached the Lovetts' house, when Charlie timidly offered me his hand, and said he supposed he had better go back to the hotel.

'Good-bye,' I answered curtly, without any comment on his remark, and the poor young fellow turned away and walked down the street with a very crestfallen air.

I think I was a little *too* hard upon him, but the conviction did not strike me until some hours afterwards. I don't remember feeling at all penitent until I went to bed that night, and then, on reviewing the day's proceedings, I was not only sorry but surprised to think that I should have quarrelled with Charlie Sandilands, and for the first time in the course of our long acquaintanceship.

Why was it? What could have made me so quick and peppery? It could never have been a foolish disappointment because Armand de Nesselrode had passed me without speaking. As that thought struck me I buried my burning face in the pillows for shame, and resolved that I would apologise to dear old Charlie, and make it up with him again the very first thing in the morning.

CHAPTER XXI.

MR. CHARTERIS.

I HOPED all the next day that Charlie would come, but he didn't. My rough speech had hurt his feelings too much, and I heard afterwards that he wandered about the country in a melancholy mood, from sunrise to sunset, making fierce resolutions to return home by the very next opportunity, which, of course, never came to anything.

I sat indoors all the morning, inditing my letter to Mr. Warrington, in which I told him exactly what had occurred, and begged him to let me have the management of my money in my own hands. I gave him a most faithful account of torn dresses, worn-out gloves, and shabby bonnets, and assured him that the very stamp I used to convey my wishes to him, I should not have been able to procure, had I not found a few centimes lying on the mantelpiece in the *salle à manger*, and annexed them boldly, under Mr. Lovett's own eyes.

Having finished my epistle, I put it in my pocket, ready for the post, and went downstairs to join the girls. As I passed through the kitchen, I saw Madame Marmoret leaning her two elbows on the open window-sill, whilst she talked with the same tradesman, in the peaked cap and the belted blue blouse, who had drawn my trustee aside for a private conference as he was conducting me from the diligence to the house, on the occasion of my arrival in St. Pucelle.

'*Tiens*, m'sieu !' she was saying in a friendly and confidential tone, as I placed my foot on the top step of the stairs. 'You are not worse off than I am : we must wait, wait, wait ! There is no other chance for us. The time cannot be far off now. Sooner or later it must come.'

'But what will there be for us when it *does* come ?' grumbled the man ; 'that is the question, Madame ! I heard a great deal of this demoiselle Anglaise and all the money she was to bring with her, but where is it ? I should like to see some in my hand, were it ever so little.'

'Bah ! you are a fool to have believed the old man. You know him of old. What would he not say to silence your importunities ? The demoiselle Anglaise has nothing—next to nothing ! She is a pauper, *une avare*, and close-fisted as a German ; and the sooner she goes back to her own country, I say, the better ! We shall make nothing out of her.'

This was a pleasant speech to overhear made of myself by an insolent old woman who chose to resent her master's impecuniosity upon me. But I resolved Madame should know that I *had* overheard it, and stamped my foot in consequence.

'*Tiens !* there is some one,' exclaimed the man, drawing backwards.

Madame turned her brown face with its wicked-looking eyes towards me without altering the position of her elbows on the window-sill.

'*Eh bien*, mamselle !' she said, without the slightest appearance of confusion. 'You have a light foot! I hope your heart corresponds to it!'

'Thank you, Madame!' I replied, in the same manner. 'I have a light step, I believe, and a quick ear, and a retentive memory. You will never find me forget one compliment you are kind enough to pay me!'

'That is well,' she laughed, as though she took my words in perfect good faith, 'for I am very poor, you see, and any little remembrance mamselle sees fit to bestow upon me will be gratefully acknowledged.'

Really, this woman's insolence was past bearing! That, and the conversation I had overheard, which so plainly betrayed what use my arrival at St. Pucelle had been put to, made my cheeks flame with indignation, and I walked past her to the sitting-room with the air of a queen. I had expected to find Tessie and Ange there, engaged in needlework, but I was mistaken. Except for Cave Charteris, sitting in the window reading a French novel, the room was empty.

I have already attempted to describe the terms on which I found myself with this gentleman, but they are not easy of portraiture. We were perfectly friendly and polite to one another, but he was already more intimate and confidential with the girls than with myself. The new acquaintanceship appeared to be terribly kept back by the remembrance of the old friendship, and the mutual fear we secretly entertained, lest a free intercourse might lead to some allusion to the past, deterred us from ever seeking the company of one another.

Confidence was at an end between us, and ease had followed it. I liked him still—thought him very handsome—and wished him no evil; but there my interest ended. The advice which I had sought from Charlie Sandilands, and which could have been so much better accorded me by a man of thirty, I had never dreamed of asking at the hands of Cave Charteris. I should have left the room again now, not directly I perceived he was in it, but at the first reasonable opportunity, had he not deterred me by broaching the very subject that had set my face in a flame.

'There appears to be a very animated conversation going on in the kitchen, Miss Marsh,' he commenced. 'Is anything wrong there?'

'Nothing worse than the tongue of Madame Marmoret, which is a continual scourge,' I answered hotly. 'The impertinence of that woman knows no bounds. How the Lovetts can endure it as they do I can't imagine; but for my own part I shall be compelled to make a formal complaint on the subject, if it is not put a stop to. I have not been accustomed to be insulted by servants, and I will not submit to it.'

'Has she dared to insult you?' he asked quickly.

Then I remembered the exact bearing of the affront I had overheard, and wished I had not mentioned it. Of all people in the world, I would not have told Mr. Charteris my money troubles. He might have offered to assist me out of them.

'I overheard part of the conversation you have alluded to, and it was not complimentary to myself. Madame Marmoret hates me, and says so openly, though I am not aware I have ever given her cause of offence. It is nothing to me what she thinks or does not think, but I will not suffer it to be bawled out of a kitchen window loud enough for the whole of St. Pucelle to hear.'

'I should think not, indeed! You should speak to Mr. Lovett about it. Hilda, are you happy here?'

I started. It was the first time he had called me by my Christian name since the moment he recognised me in the *salle à manger*.

'Yes,' I answered quietly. 'I am quite happy, thank you.'

'I do not know, of course, anything of your private affairs, neither have I the right to ask, but I don't consider things are as comfortable here as they ought to be. I am only on a shooting excursion myself, and prepared to live "in the rough," but even I could wish for a few more of the luxuries of civilisation. Mr. Lovett calls you his adopted daughter, still——'

'I am not his adopted daughter,' I interrupted quickly, 'nor have I any desire to be so. I do not know what motive he has in saying it. I pay for my board and lodging here, just as you do. Mr. Lovett offered me the home, after my mother's death, and I accepted it, for the sake of rest and quiet. But I do not at all know how long I shall remain with them.'

'Is it so? The old gentleman made me understand quite differently. But I am very glad to hear you are independent, Hilda. Forgive me for being so bold as to say so; but I know of old what a proud spirit you have, and can imagine nothing more galling to you than to eat the bread of charity.'

'Nothing would have induced me to do so. I would have scrubbed floors first.'

'I am sure of it. Neither does our reverend friend appear to me to be in a position to extend hospitality to his friends. I have been assailed more than once, since my sojourn here, by people entreating me to use my influence with him to make him pay what he owes them.'

'Have you really, Mr. Charteris !'

This was a subject on which I felt I *could* speak with him—on which, too, he might give me some valuable advice.

'Oh, it is no secret ! The old man is in debt all over this town and a dozen others. I knew that before I had been here a week. But it is no concern of ours. All we have to do is to pay our way as long as it suits our convenience, and to leave him when it ceases to do so. But the old sinner has contrived to book me for the next two months, anyway !'

'How so ?' I demanded, with interest.

'Why, the second or third day I was here—before I knew all this, you know—he asked me, as a great favour, to advance him fifty pounds—for something that he wanted on *your* account, I believe.'

'On *my* account !' I cried, flaring up. 'How *dared* he ? Oh, Mr. Charteris, I hope you will believe this is perfect news to me ! I owe Mr. Lovett nothing. He is my trustee, and has all my money in his own hands. It was shameful of him to use my name in the matter !'

'Now, don't agitate yourself in that fashion. I knew at once it was a ruse of the old boy's, but it was not my business to say so, and it made no difference to me if he had the money in advance or not.'

'And you paid him fifty pounds for two months' board !' I said incredulously.

'Something like it. I believe the agreement was that I should pay five pounds a week.'

At this I could not help laughing.

'You must be very rich to be able to afford to throw your money away in that way.'

'I am not poor,' he answered slowly; and I wondered where his money had come from.

He had not been independent in the old days—far from it; for he had often talked to me of the necessity of his working to provide a home before he could take a wife to himself. Perhaps his father had died in the silent interim that stretched between the present and the past. Before I quite knew what I was about, I had asked the question

'Is your father alive still?'

'Yes. Why do you ask?'

'I don't know. Merely for the sake of talking, I suppose. I am not above that womanly weakness.'

'I have thought, since I have been here, that you had got altogether above it. It seems as if I had hardly heard your voice: you are so unusually silent and reserved.'

'I have had a great sorrow, you must remember, Mr. Charteris, and I cannot yet laugh and talk as I used to do.'

'Ah, how you used to laugh in the old days! I fancy I can hear you now! Hilda, do you ever think of that time, and of the hours we spent wandering up and down the Crystal Palace Gardens together? How beautiful those gardens were! They have nothing like them abroad, unless we except the grounds at Versailles, after which, I believe, they are modelled.'

We were getting on dangerous ground now, and I felt it. I had no desire to renew anything like a sentimental flirtation with Mr. Charteris; the scar which his past conduct had left upon my heart, though now painless, was too deep for trifling even with memory; and therefore I did my best to turn the conversation.

'Ah, Versailles! I have never seen those gardens, though I have heard so much about them. I am a great ignoramus, Mr. Charteris, you must know, in all things connected with travel. This is actually the first time I have ever set my foot out of England!'

'So much the better! You have all your pleasure to come, instead of having exhausted before you know how to appreciate it. I can well imagine how an intelligent mind like yours will expand beneath the wonders of nature and art with which it has still to become acquainted. You are marvellously young and fresh for your age, Hilda.'

'You are the first person who has ever said so. I think, on the contrary, that I am marvellously old and used-up. To judge from my general feelings, I might be sixty.'

'Just at present I dare say you might. You must have felt your late loss terribly!'

My lip trembled, and I turned away from him. I could not have answered even 'Yes' at that moment without breaking down, and I would have died sooner than break down before Cave Charteris.

'I can't tell you what a shock it was to me to hear it!' he went on softly. 'It seemed to revive the past, and bring it back as if it had occurred only yesterday. She was always good and kind to me, and you too, Hilda—indeed, I used to dare to think at that time that you regarded me as a *very dear* friend.'

He used to dare to think! He cast his calculating untrue eyes upon me as he spoke; and I knew that he remembered as vividly as I did, and was only trying how far he could impose on my credulity and make me think him blameless. The idea nerved me for action. Had I followed the bent of my inclinations, I should have hurled indignant reproaches on his head, and made him, in consequence, believe that his conduct had still the power to pain me. But I stamped on my inclination, and answered him as coolly as if the subject were of the utmost indifference, and revived no recollections whatever, pleasant or unpleasant, with regard to himself.

'And so I did,' I replied. 'I had so few companions of my own age at Norwood, I remember hailing your advent as a perfect godsend. It was a very dull place for a girl to live in, particularly in the quiet way we used to do.'

'I never thought it dull,' he sighed—'that is, when I was with you.'

'Oh, you forget! It happened such a long time ago! But I can remember some very dull afternoons we spent there, when the roads were all mud and it rained continuously, and we had no resource indoors except playing at cards and singing over those eternal old songs of mine.'

'You never sing now,' he said eagerly. 'How charmed I should be to hear some of the dear old songs! Won't you sing them to me, Hilda?'

'No, I never sing now, Mr. Charteris. My voice is not strong, and I have too many other things to do.'

'You might sing for *me* though, just to revive that happy memory. I suppose the *reality* will never come over again, will it?'

I looked in his face with well-feigned surprise. 'How can what is past come over again? and with my dear mother gone, too! I think you are talking nonsense, Mr. Charteris.'

'You must know what I mean. Will the old feelings we had for each other never be revived?'

I knew as well as he did what he meant. He wanted to make love to me again—to make me believe once more that his soft tones and looks and words were good for what they seemed. But the spell was broken, the old glamour had faded away. I saw him as the world saw him, and I was not to be taken in a second time.

'I don't see that they want reviving, Mr. Charteris. We liked each other very well then, and I suppose we like each other very well now. We haven't quarrelled, have we? Perhaps I am a graver woman than you expected to see; but five years is a long interval, you know: and it is more likely you have forgotten what I was, than that I have altered as much as you seem to suppose.'

'You don't see it in the same light as I do,' he said, with a deep sigh that he pumped up from the lowest depths of his waistcoat.

He wanted me to blush and look conscious and uncomfortable, and then he would have seized the opportunity to swear he had been loving me through all the period of our separation, and should be miserable until he heard that I loved him in return.

But with all his desire to get up a small excitement, wherewith to while away the hours when he could not be shooting in the forest of Piron, Mr. Charteris was not so foolish as to commit himself where there appeared no chance of remunerating his trouble; and so he gave me up as a bad job, and, with a gesture of impatience, resumed the study of his French novel. But I would not leave one stone unturned by which I thought to convince him that he was utterly mistaken in thinking I had ever given a second thought to his heartless desertion of me.

'How is your cousin Fred Stephenson, Mr. Charteris?' I asked, with a jaunty air.

'Oh, he's well enough,' he replied sulkily.

'I thought you were going to ask him over here for a day. I wish you would—I should like to see him again. He seemed such a nice pleasant boy. I took quite a fancy to him.'

'And I suppose you are afraid, if you don't see him soon, that your fancy will evaporate. It is "out of sight, out of mind" with you, Miss Marsh, like the generality of women.'

'Well, you wouldn't have me in the minority, would you? I always stick up for my sex, and have no desire to fare better than the rest of them. Since I am a woman, I'll be one all over. I don't like half and half animals.'

'You need have no fear of being mistaken for anything else, Miss Marsh. You have all the sex's attributes strongly marked upon you, even to asserting the right to change your mind as often as you choose.'

'I am so glad!' I said gleefully. 'I like to claim my privileges, and a masculine woman never gets any. But what has all this to do with your cousin Fred Stephenson?'

'Why, that as you have taken a fancy to him, I don't think I shall ask him over here. I am a sort of guardian of his whilst abroad, and he is of a susceptible age when the heart is more readily affected by unkindness and neglect than at any other.'

'And you think I shall be unkind to the boy.'

'I think you will be too kind, and then you will forget all about him. Some carroty-haired creature will come in the way'—this was a hit at poor Charlie Sandilands, whose hair, *en passant*, was not a bit more carroty than his own—'and then Fred will be forgotten and left out in the cold, and will be as little able, perhaps, to read the meaning of the riddle as some other of your friends have been who have suffered a similar neglect at your fair hands.'

This was very pretty fencing, but I felt I must put a stop to it. It was becoming ridiculous to me, which was proof sufficient how entirely it had lost its sting.

'Look here, Mr. Charteris,' I said decidedly, 'you can do as you like with regard to your cousin, but I wish you would not talk such nonsense to me. I have never left anybody out in the cold. If you are alluding to yourself, all I can say is that I feel for you exactly what I did before'—I was really obliged to make a little reservation here, and whisper inwardly 'before you spoke to me to-day'—'we were always excellent friends in my dear mother's lifetime, and I have no wish to be less to you now. But it is hardly reasonable to suppose that during a separation of five years our tastes may not have grown a little apart. I don't say they have, but meeting as we have done is really like making a fresh acquaintance, and the old ground has to be gone over again. I wish you would believe, however, that I have none but kindly feelings towards you—why should I have? —and am quite ready to be as good friends as you are.'

I did it very well, I think, because the only effect my communication had was to turn him still more sulky.

'Pray don't make any apologies,' he replied, without looking up from his book; 'I perfectly understand all you would say, and I think I perfectly understand you into the bargain.'

He was going to be rude now. Cave Charteris was the sort of man who becomes rude directly his self-love is wounded, and that is what I have never put up with from any one. So I gathered my work together, and walked out of the room with dignity, and did not return to it again until the sound of the girls' voices assured me that I should not be left alone with Mr. Charteris.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE WOLF.

THE day wore on, and Charlie Sandilands did not come. I was standing at the window towards evening, wondering at his absence, and blaming my folly in having spoken to him as I did, when I perceived the white hat and red cherries of Miss Markham bobbing up the street. I had taken quite an aversion to this woman. I had detected her in so much falsehood and exaggeration, and I knew her to be so malicious and ill-natured, that I avoided her company whenever it was possible to do so. I should have been obliged, however, to live in my bedroom had I contrived to elude her altogether ; for hardly a morning passed without her spending two or three hours at our house. The only days she did not honour us were those on which she knew that Mr. Charteris would be shooting in the forest. On his fishing excursions she was almost sure to track and follow him. When her dear friend, Mrs. Carolus, had told me that her conduct with this gentleman was a scandal, I had been quite unable to believe that any woman of middle age and mediocre attractions could possibly be so foolish as to think herself capable of touching the heart of a young, handsome, worldly man like Cave Charteris. But it was easy for any one to believe it now.

I had seen Mr. Charteris laugh at or repulse her, just as the humour took him; but, apparently impervious to either ridicule or rudeness, she still pursued him, in-doors or out of doors, although he often put on his hat as soon as she appeared, and left the house by the back way. To Tessie, and Ange, and myself, Miss Markham had become a perfect nuisance, for, wherever she might be, she monopolised the conversation, which always ran in the most egotistical manner on herself, her admirers, and her triumphs. Mr. Lovett was the only creature who welcomed her; and whether it was that they were equally vain, self-seeking, and fond of flattery, I know not, but they always seemed to get on together. The old man continued to affirm that Miss Markham was one of the most intelligent and agreeable ladies he knew, and she never lost an opportunity of lauding his personal merits and his talents, or of rebuking the girls for not paying him sufficient attention, until at last I began to fear whether she might not turn the foolish old man's brain to that extent that he would really imagine his daughters were not as devoted and loving and obedient as they possibly could be.

It had become a joke with Tessie and Ange and me to give Mr. Charteris warning of Sophia Markham's approach, but I was angry with him and angry with myself that evening, and I watched the bobbing cherries draw nearer and nearer without saying a word. So she was flung into the midst of us like a grenade.

'How d'ye do! how d'ye do! to everybody,' she exclaimed, nodding to the company in general, and then she pounced upon the unhappy Cave in particular. 'Ah! you naughty fellow, come and make confession of your sins at once! What did you mean by cutting me this morning after that fashion? I've a great mind to give you a dreadful penance, one that you will not forget in a hurry ; only you mustn't make those saucy eyes at me, or I shall forget all about it.'

'Cutting *you*, Miss Markham,' he replied, with serio-comic gravity. 'How *can* you think so? Where was it, and when?'

'Where indeed?—why, close by the *Grotte de S. Jean*, of course. Now don't pretend you didn't see me, because I know you did. You began to run directly I turned the corner.'

'That must be a mistake! I never run.'

'Well, you walked very fast then, so fast that I couldn't overtake you. And you dropped a rose-bud from your button-hole in your flight, and I picked it up, and here it is,'—displaying it in the bosom of her dress—'and you shan't have it back again,' with infantine fervour, 'no! not if you begged on your bended knees for it, you naughty boy! So there—there!' ended Miss Markham, playfully, as she struck his face two or three times with the flower, which she had taken in her hand.

'I believe you've put my eye out,' he said quite crossly, as he covered the injured member with his hand.

'Oh, poor little eye! let me see,' cried Miss Markham, as she bent over his chair. 'Shall I try and make it well again?'

'No! leave me alone!' he answered, in a tone which caused her unsensitive cheek to grow red as she attempted to cover her confusion by addressing herself to the rest of the party. 'Dear Mr. Lovett! I have not spoken to you yet. But I always keep the best to the last, you know. You're my *bong bouche!* How tired you look this evening. Tessie, you should take more care of your papa! I don't at all hold with running after poor people and forgetting those at home.'

'I hope we don't do that. Do we, papa?' said Tessie, with her quiet smile.

'No, my dear! certainly not! But I think I overwalked myself a little this morning. These warm days in autumn are more enervating sometimes than those of summer.'

'But you shouldn't overwalk yourself, dear Mr. Lovett, and you should have broth or something good prepared for you against you return. Do you have broth made for your father, Tessie?'

'Papa has everything he requires, thank you, Miss Markham,' replied Ange, briskly. 'If he asked for the Coliseum at Rome, Tessie would get it for him if she could.'

'Ah! but you mustn't wait till he asks for it. You should anticipate his wishes. That is not a very tidy fashion of wearing your hair, Ange. It is half-way down your back.'

'I know it is,' said Ange bluntly.

'Go and put it up, my dear! go and put it up!' said her father, with kindly authority.

And the girl, little pleased at an order which had originated with Miss Markham, left the romm with a lingering step and a grimace.

'I passed you last evening, Miss Marsh,' continued our visitor; 'but you appeared to be so *deeply* engaged that I wouldn't stop to speak, for fear of spoiling sport.'

'You were wise, perhaps,' was my reply.

'Not that I envied you your admirer, you know; he, he, he! He was rather too bucolic-looking for my taste. I should say he had never been farther than a turnip-field in his life before.'

'You're quite right, Miss Markham, as you always are.'

'Well, my penetration is not often in fault.'

'I am sure of it! Considering that Mr. Sandilands is a regular cockney and has lived in London all his life, you have made a first-rate shot!'

She reddened somewhat and began to sniff, after a peculiar manner she had whenever she found herself in the wrong.

'Ah, well! his looks belie the fact, that's all! if it *is* a fact. Is that little black monkey off your back yet, Mr. Charteris?'

'I am not aware it was ever there, Miss Markham.'

'Never mind; we won't say anything more about it, but make it up next time we are alone. Have you heard the last rumour about those dreadful Johnstones, Mr. Lovett? They actually say that she was nothing but a milliner's apprentice, whom he picked up in the streets carrying a bandbox in her hands. What shall we come to next, I wonder, when such creatures are permitted to move about society without being labelled?'

At this juncture I slipped out of the room to put on my hat and see if I could shake off some of the unholy influence this woman shed around her, in the open air. As I passed through the garden and quietly unlatched the gate, a figure started up from the shadow of the wall as if to join me. It was Mr. Charteris.

'May I walk a little way with you, Hilda, and smoke my cigar in your company?' he asked.

'No, thank you,' I replied abruptly. 'I would rather not.'

'Yet you spent two or three hours in Mr. Sandilands' society yesterday,' he said, with a reproachful air.

'I know I did; but I had not seen him for some time, and we had much to talk of. To-night I would rather be alone.'

'As you will. I have no desire to intrude my company upon you. *Bon voyage!*'

I saw he was offended, but I could not help it. The conversation we had held that morning was too fresh in both our minds. He would have renewed the subject, which as far as I was concerned was exhausted. I had nothing more to say about it, and I feared lest in discussion I might be led to betray my past regard for him. Besides, although I wished him no harm, I did not consider that Mr. Charteris's behaviour to me entitled him to rank as one of my friends. He had proved himself false, fickle, and cold-hearted. No man can have worse attributes for any position in life. He was not worthy of any woman's confidence or regard, and I was quite sure he could never have more from me than my acquaintance.

It was a luscious, balmy evening, with just sufficient coolness to make walking a pleasure. To leave the clang of that woman's tongue behind me, and to encounter the soft stilly atmosphere, was like entering a church from a public-house. I breathed more freely as I found myself alone, at liberty to think without disturbance. It was but just six o'clock. The shadows had not yet fallen to blot out the beautiful, delicate hues of the wild-flowers that bordered the roadway; nor to hush the evening hymns of the birds that were singing from every bough.

I would not take my favourite walk, which led towards the Château des Roses, because I was alone, and a silly fear of ridicule from Tessie and her sister always made me avoid anything that looked like a desire to meet the Baron de Nesselrode. So, as soon as the house I had quitted was out of sight, I struck up a side-path which led in the opposite direction and towards the forest of Piron. This forest, which has been rendered so celebrated by poets and writers of romance, is still the great point to which the eyes of all sportsmen in the Wallon are lovingly directed, although the march of civilisation has here, as everywhere else, driven the larger game farther and farther back into the recesses of their covert, until it is now as difficult to find them as it was once to extirpate them.

Many stories had been told me of the difficulties encountered even by the royal sportsmen of the realm, in their desire to obtain good specimens of wolves, boars and wild turkeys from the forest of Piron ; and Armand de Nesselrode had been quoted in my presence as the most successful hunter that had been known to penetrate it. The floor of his hall at the château was covered with wolf-skins, the contemplation of which had more than once made me shudder as I thought of the risks he must have run in procuring them.

Cave Charteris and he were constantly together at this time, shooting on horseback and on foot, and the bags of small game which the former used to bring home for our table proved that there were plenty of other marks in the forest besides those dangerous wolves and thrice dangerous wild boars.

I knew the road to it well. It was lonely; but we never associated danger with loneliness at St. Pucelle ; and at one point of it there stood a wayside shrine, a pretty, romantic, ruined piece of architecture, that I had sketched more than once, and from which a narrow path led through fields of grass and turnips back to my home again.

The Piron road had not much in it to attract the eye before this little shrine was reached, and I walked along its side-path rapidly, as was my custom to walk when alone, with my eyes cast down and my brain working away as fast as it could go, at every subject that passed through it.

I had left St. Pucelle a mile—perhaps a mile and a half—behind me, when something, I knew not what, impelled me suddenly to look up and scan the surrounding landscape. I had reached the centre of a long straight road, on either side of which ran a narrow footpath, fringed by the smallest of hedges, in many places trampled down by feet passing over it into the fields beyond. Not a tree sheltered the road anywhere—it was simply a highway to the next town. The dark mass of trees composing the forest loomed in the distance, but so far off as to appear like one clump against the greyish-blue sky of evening ; behind me lay St. Pucelle, but I had placed a hill between us, and could only see the top of the spire of St. Marie and the wreaths of smoke that ascended from a little factory at the bottom of the town. I cast my eyes again in front. What was that dark figure advancing to meet me, that was sometimes in the light and sometimes in the shade, and seemed so uncertain in its movements and designs? Could it be a donkey? I smiled as the idea crossed my mind.

How could a donkey slouch in that absurd manner, and move with a shuffling, trotting gait, as though its shoulders were higher than its head! But the next moment I had turned as pale as death, and my heart almost stopped its beating from terror. Could it be—was it possible it could be—*a wolf?*

Directly I had conceived the thought I felt sure that I was right. Here, in the gloaming, without shelter of any kind, alone and unarmed, I was to meet one of these fearful beasts out of the forest, whose very names were sufficient to fill my breast with terror.

I don't think I ever felt so frightened in my life as I did at that moment. Where should I run? What could I do?

I looked across the fields on either side. They were sown with turnips, and stood upon a slope. If I attempted to plod my way through them I should only be impeding my progress, and making my presence more conspicuously apparent to the animal than it was now.

Was I deceiving myself through fear? I strained my sight again to make sure what it was that advanced upon me.

Oh! there was no doubt about it! I could distinguish the brute's appearance perfectly as he shambled along the pathway. And he was coming faster. He had broken into a swinging trot, with his nose to the ground. He had scented me; there was no hope but in flight.

All this, which takes so long to write, had taken but a second to flash through my brain, and in another I had turned, and was running back to St. Pucelle as fast as ever my legs could carry me. I dared not stop to look round, but in my terror I fancied I heard the breathing of the animal close behind me, and his steps gaining upon mine. After a quarter of a mile, perhaps, I had run myself out of breath; each step seemed as if it would choke me, and I believed that I was lost, and must succumb. 'I shall never see St. Pucelle again,' I thought sobbingly, as I flew along. 'I shall be torn to pieces in the most horrible manner, and no one will even hear of my fate. I shall never know if Armand and Tessie are happy—or if——'

But here some great obstacle interposed itself between my blinded eyes and the pathway, and I fell with a loud scream of terror into the very arms of Monsieur de Nesselrode.

'Mademoiselle Marsh!' he exclaimed, in accents of the greatest surprise. 'What is the matter? who has dared to frighten you?'

'The wolf! the wolf!' I cried, struggling with him. 'Let me go—save yourself—it is close upon us!'

'A wolf—and here! *Mais, mademoiselle, c'est impossible!* it is not to be credited. Some one has been wicked enough to frighten you without cause.'

His words and manner somewhat reassured me, but I was still very much alarmed.

'Indeed—indeed I am right. Look up the road for yourself! It is coming fast from the forest.'

Without relinquishing his hold of me, I saw him glance from right to left, over my shoulder, trying to distinguish the cause of my fear.

'*Sacré*, Mademoiselle! you are correct. Something does advance this way.'

'I told you so!' I exclaimed, in a fresh paroxysm of terror. 'Oh! leave me, monsieur, leave me! Run for your life—it is impossible both of us can be saved.'

'*Je ne veux pas te quitter*,' he answered, using the soft personal pronoun that with a Frenchman means so much; and then he shouted aloud: '*Hillo! hillo! à bas là! Hillo!*'

'You cannot frighten it away,' I said imploringly. 'Oh, go—for my sake! Armand, pray go!'

'It is not a wolf at all, mademoiselle,' he replied calmly. 'I see it now plainly, but I do not wonder at your taking it for one.'

'What is it, then?'

'One of our half-bred sheep-dogs finding his way home to his master. See! here he comes. He is about to pass us. Do not tremble any longer, mademoiselle. Your enemy has just trotted by, looking like a veritable wolf indeed, and very much ashamed of himself for doing so.'

I glanced up, and there, shambling along the road peaceably enough, but looking very dangerous notwithstanding, with his huge size, rough coat and glaring red eyes, was one of those creatures, half-wolf, half-dog, which the shepherds of the Piron prize so much as guardians of their flocks against the very animals from which they sprung.

'What must you think of me?' I said, as the huge brute shuffled out of sight, and I remembered what an exhibition I had made of myself.

'I think that you are a brave woman who would have persuaded me to save myself, and leave you to what you believed would prove a terrible death.'

'I hope I said nothing absurd—I entirely forget what I did say,' I stammered, with vivid consciousness that I had called him by his Christian name. 'And all for a stupid sheep-dog, too ; I am so ashamed of myself.'

'But you are trembling still, and you must sit down for a little while before you attempt to return to St. Pucelle. Do you often take such solitary walks, mademoiselle?'

'Yes, I like to walk alone, and I did not think there could be any danger.'

'Neither is there. These dogs look very formidable, but they have never been known to attack anybody unprovoked. The next time you meet one, all you have to do is to stand aside and let him pass.'

'Oh! I hope I shall not meet another,' I said, shuddering. 'I do not like them. We have no such dogs in England, and I shall never forget the fright it gave me.'

Monsieur de Nesselrode had selected a grassy knoll by the roadside for me to rest upon, and my heart was beating more in its proper time. What a difference a few seconds had effected in my feelings! A minute ago I firmly believed myself to be in the jaws of death. Now it seemed as if nothing could have the power to hurt or alarm me. I turned towards Armand de Nesselrode gratefully.

'I wish you would not look so pale,' he observed; 'you are not still frightened, I hope?'

'Oh no! that is all passed away, and I am quite at my ease again. How good it was of you, monsieur, to stand by me as you did.'

He smiled at me. His was such a beautiful smile. It came rarely, but when it did, it lighted up all his features like a glory. There was no mirth in it—I think self-reproach at that period had chased away from his spirit all the merriment which later I saw shine forth—but it was thoroughly appreciative and genuine. On the present occasion his smile seemed to say much more than he chose his lips should utter.

'You will not let me thank you,' I continued, 'but I must. Thank God! my fears were not well founded, and we did not both perish. For I feel you would have died sooner than let me be torn from your grasp.'

'Of course I would!'

'Oh! I think a brave man is the most wonderful and beautiful thing God ever made. Why should you have sacrificed your life for me, of whom you know nothing?'

'It would have been my duty to lay it down under such circumstances, mademoiselle, for any woman—and of all women——'

But here he stopped short, as though ignorant how to finish his sentence, and I did not see the way to help him. Presently he began again :

'You were good enough to say once, mademoiselle, that it would interest you to hear the means by which I was brought down to my present position. Shall I tell you the story now?'

'Do, monsieur,' I said, turning my eyes upon him.

He was seated at a little distance from me, with both his hands between his knees, digging up the earth under his feet with the light cane he usually carried. His eyes were downcast, and I noticed the length of the dark lashes that lay upon his cheek, and contrasted with the grave pallor that seemed suddenly to have overspread his countenance. Whatever this story might be, it was evidently hard to tell, and I prepared myself to hear a confession of much folly and evil, and perhaps—dishonour. Should I like him the less, I asked myself, when his tale was finished?

I did not believe I should like him the less. I felt so confident that whatever his sins might have been, Armand de Nesselrode possessed the power of rising above them.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE BARON'S STORY.

'I AM afraid you will weary of me before I have finished my recital,' commenced the Baron.

'I shall not weary, monsieur,' I answered simply.

'You will keep my confidence, I know! This is the first time I have ever told the history of my folly to a living creature.'

I wondered for a moment, then, why he should have elected to tell it to me. But he went on too rapidly for me to put the question to him.

'I have never had the happiness to possess a mother, a sister, or even a female relation sufficiently near to whom I could confide my sorrows or my perplexities. From a little child I was brought up in the society of men, and taught, as far as possible, to guide myself. That circumstance has been a terrible drawback to me, mademoiselle.'

'Yes—so long as you were a little child.'

'And not afterwards?'

'Not so much afterwards! The mother is the God of the child, monsieur, and if a boy has a good, true, pure-hearted mother who loves him, he can have no better friend nor *confidante* than herself, until he becomes a man. But then their positions should alter. The *man* who leans upon his mother is a milksop. He should be her protector—her guide—even her counsellor. It is thus that women are rewarded for the care and pains with which they have watched over the infancy of their little ones.'

'How true a woman you are!' he said, earnestly.

'I hope so, monsieur! I should be sorry to deserve any other name. But we are wandering from your story.'

'My mother died when I was quite a baby. She was very beautiful, and my father, who held a high position at Court, was so distracted by her loss that he threw up his appointment, left all his friends, and wandered for many years in foreign countries.

Meanwhile, I was transferred from my nurse's arms to those of a private tutor, whose house I left only to go to college. I had an uncle on the mother's side, Le Sieur de Beaupré, the father of the cousin to whom I told you I was once betrothed. This betrothal was contracted when I was very young—not yet sixteen, whilst Blanche had only completed her fourteenth year. We were betrothed with the consent and at the desire of my father, who was at that time wandering about the Brazils, and expressed his intention of not returning to Paris until I had passed through the *Athénée*, and was ready to be married. I had grown, therefore, up to eighteen years of age without ever having seen my father.'

'What a sad, desolate childhood!' I exclaimed; 'and how different from mine, monsieur! My father died, it is true, but my dear mother never left me, day nor night, from the hour of my birth. No wonder that you should have gone wrong, without affection, counsel, or home. Those who left you so are more to blame for what followed than you are.'

'You pity me, mademoiselle?'

'I do indeed! from the bottom of my heart! I see you as a child and a growing man, lonely and unloved, and I could weep for the many desolate and unhappy hours you must have passed.'

'*Que le bon Dieu te bénisse!*' he said softly, as he lifted the hand that was lying idly on my lap to his lips, and let it quickly drop again. The action sent the blood rushing to both our faces, and for a minute or two we were silent altogether.

'Yes! I was very unhappy at that period,' continued the Baron. 'It seemed to me that Heaven was unjust in so unequally dividing its favours. I had every luxury, because m father was rich, but I would have exchanged them all fo caress when I went to bed at night, or for the touch of a soft hand upon my head. I saw other fathers proud of their sons, and I wondered what I had done that mine should never care to see or hear from me, and scarcely took the trouble to write home to ask if I were dead or alive. Such thoughts embittered my mind and made it callous, and after I entered the *Athénée* and joined the wild band of students assembled within its walls, I soon became the wildest of them all, and well known to the authorities as a dangerous leader into all sorts of mischief. Why should I not be? what was there to restrain me? No mother's look of pain—no father's frown—nothing but a remonstrance from Monsieur de Beaupré, that my allowance did not last long enough, and that if I could not moderate my expenses he should be obliged to inform his brother-in-law. So things went on till I was twenty-one, when the news reached Paris of my father's death. I came into my title and my fortune, and was considered to be one of the best matches in Paris. But, mademoiselle, I am fatiguing you. Why should I be so vain as to imagine that all these paltry details can hold any interest for you?'

'Indeed, monsieur, I am deeply interested. Pray believe me when I say so.'

'Why should I tell this tale of folly and dissipation to you?' he went on, musingly; 'I knew I should have to confess it some day, to the woman I should make my wife—if such an event ever happens—but I never thought to disclose it before. *Hélas!* this world brings strange things to pass! As soon as my uncle Beaupré heard of my father's death, he tried to persuade me to complete the marriage with his daughter at once, but I was verse to the idea of tying myself down so soon, and refused to so until the time named in the contract, which was on the attainment of my twenty-fourth year. I left the *Athénée*, of course, and settling in my own hôtel, on the Boulevards des Tuileries, plunged, with the aid of my old college companions, into every sort of dissipation. Will mademoiselle pardon me for mentioning such a thing?'

'We are better used to the mention of it in England, monsieur, than your ladies are in Paris, although we recognise its necessity less, and deplore its existence more. We Englishwomen are permitted to know that our men lead very different lives from ourselves, but we are taught at the same time that, for that very reason, it behoves us to be all the purer and more discreet, in order to win them back to a right and virtuous living.'

'And you do so win them! In all the world there are no such lovers of domestic life as there are in England.'

'I believe it,' I answered, for I am very proud of and very devoted to my own country-people, whatever friends I may have found in other nations.

'I am speaking now, mademoiselle, of ten years ago—when the first notes of that terrible discord that shook France to her foundations were beginning to be heard, and Paris was in a state of ferment and expectation. The revolution had not commenced, but disaffection was already pre-evident amongst the labouring classes, and *émeutes* and brawls were of hourly occurrence in the city. It was on the occasion of the last night of the old year, which devotees celebrate in the churches and roysterers in the streets. I was returning home after the theatre with some of my friends, about the hour of midnight mass, when, just outside the church of the Madeleine, I saw a young girl standing up against the wall, and prevented from passing on her way by a band of tipsy artisans who surrounded her, calling out, "*A bas* the aristocrat!"—"Pull off her hood and rub her face in the mud!"—"Down on her knees and make her pray for the *bonnets rouges!*" and other phrases of similar import. You may suppose that was more than I and my friends could stand, and we went at once to her rescue. The poor child caught hold of my arm, crying, "Oh! save me, monsieur; I am no aristocrat. My father is a commoner, and lives but a couple of streets from here." A few blows and rough words soon dispersed the rioters, and I took the young lady home under my protection. I found that her name was Corinne Duplat, and her father was a man of letters. She was very beautiful——'

'Oh yes, I know! You needn't tell me,' I interrupted him, impatiently. 'She was the loveliest creature you had ever seen, and you became enamoured of her at once. You can skip all that! I have heard it so often before.'

The Baron fixed his dark eyes upon me with an expression of the greatest surprise. After all my amiability and interest, he did not know what to make of the sudden change. I suppose I looked as sulky as a bear, for he immediately began to apologise.

'I felt I should weary mademoiselle. Let me say no more than to thank you for the patience with which you have listened to me.'

But this was not what I wanted.

I sat there, biting my lip and feeling very much as if I should cry; whilst Armand de Nesselrode looked deeply annoyed and a little bit wounded.

'I have abused your goodness,' he continued, 'and I shall never forgive myself.'

'No, no, monsieur! Do not think so. It was only because I was in such haste to hear the end of the story. Go on about Corinne! She was very beautiful, and you loved her!'

'I *thought* I loved her,' he corrected me, gently. 'I was very young and knew no better; I have found out since what true love is.'

'Yes, monsieur?'

'Her father neglected her dreadfully, and let her go anywhere alone, which is unheard of amongst young ladies in Paris. It was natural that after a while I should constitute myself her protector. She was only seventeen, and very fragile—almost ethereal in appearance; and when I had known her for about six months, I felt I should like to make her my wife. I forgot my betrothal to my cousin Blanche. All my wishes centred in the hope of marrying Corinne. I broached the subject one day to her father, almost timidly. He was taken aback by my communication.

'"Marry my daughter!" he exclaimed. "You cannot know what you are asking for."

'"I know I am not worthy of her," I began, but he cut me short.

'"My dear Baron, such an alliance as you would offer Corinne is beyond all my hopes. But it is impossible."

'"Why?"

'"Because she is doomed. She carries in her the seeds of a disease which must terminate her existence within a few years. She can marry no one."

'This intelligence was a great blow to me. I would not believe it—she looked so healthy, though delicate. I urged Monsieur Duplat to permit the marriage to take place, and I believed it would have been accomplished, had a sudden chill not taken the poor child off before another month was over her head.'

'She is *dead!*' I exclaimed, pity taking the place of all other feelings. 'Oh, how you must have grieved for her!'

'Yes, I was very inconsolable for a time, and it was this grief, mademoiselle, that led to all my subsequent misfortunes. Monsieur Duplat was a *littérateur* whose very uncertain income was dependent on his humour for writing, and unfortunately his humour too often took the direction of drinking instead. In my sorrow for the loss of Corinne, I conceived the romantic idea of being a son to her father, and invited the old man to come and live with me in my hôtel. I had so much money, there was plenty for us both. Why should he not enjoy it also? Amidst all my former dissipations I had never been a gambler, and it was Monsieur Duplat himself who had on our first acquaintanceship introduced me to the gaming-tables of Paris. After he came to live with me, idleness and regret for his daughter's death seemed to drive him to them oftener than before, and wherever he went I accompanied him. I felt reckless too at that time, and quite indifferent as to my future. I believed, like most young mourners, that I should never be happy again, and it did not signify what became of me. This is how I contracted the spirit of gaming. Two of us were drawing on my (apparently) inexhaustible fortune at the same moment, for you may be sure I paid all Duplat's debts before my own. My uncle Beaupré was not long in hearing of my lavish expenditure, and remonstrated with me in his daughter's name. But a devil seemed to have entered into me—and when I found that I had caused a large portion of my fortune to disappear, I attempted to remedy the evil by staking more recklessly than before. At last the crash came, and my eyes were opened. Monsieur Duplat had persuaded me to stand security for an extravagant sum of money by which, as he said, he was to be made independent for life, and the day after he got it he decamped, leaving me in the lurch to meet all his liabilities as well as my own. The creditors swooped down upon me like birds of prey. I found that Duplat had procured valuables all over the town in my name, besides forging it for a large amount of ready money from my bankers, and I was literally ruined.'

'What an ingrate!' I exclaimed. 'Oh, monsieur! I am sure that, with your generous spirit, the ingratitude of it was the hardest part to bear.'

'It was not calculated to raise my opinion of human nature, mademoiselle, and when I thought of poor little Corinne, and how it would have broken her heart to see her father's conduct to me, I was glad that she was safe in heaven, and freed from it all. My uncle came to Paris as soon as he knew of my ruin, and informed me that all idea of a marriage between *mademoiselle ma cousine* and myself was at an end, which I was not sorry to hear. It was found that twelve years' income would only suffice to discharge the debts for which I was liable; my estates in Versailles and Lausanne being entailed and consequently not marketable. I had the choice, therefore, of two alternatives—to expatriate myself to this place and live upon a yearly sum of six thousand francs allowed me by my creditors, or to go to gaol. I chose the former, though there is but little to choose between them. St. Pucelle is like a prison to me, and I have only vegetated since I came here. Conceive if you can, mademoiselle, the change from the life I led in Paris, and the solitude I now enjoy.'

'But it will not last for ever, monsieur. How many years have you lived at the château?'

'Nine. I was thirty on my last birthday.'

'Then the time of your probation will soon be up, will it not?'

'There are three or four years more to run. *Three or four years! Mon Dieu!* what an eternity it seems in prospect!'

I hardly knew how to answer him. I longed so much to give him comfort, but if he could not see the lesson this trial was calculated to teach him in the same light that I did, I feared my words might irritate instead of soothe him. So I only said:

'Monsieur le Baron, don't despair! There is one person feels very deeply for you, and that is myself.'

'You do not despise me, then! You have heard all, and you can still be my friend?'

'Most certainly! You have been very weak, but you have not been wicked. The money you wasted was your own. It was that base ungrateful creature Duplat that caused your ruin.'

'Remember that I have told it you in confidence. Even Monsieur Beaupré does not know the extent to which he has robbed me. He was Corinne's father, and for her sake I wish, as far as possible, to spare him.'

'I respect you for the wish; but, monsieur, now that the worst is over, will you not take courage and look forward to the time that is coming, when you will begin life anew, and be able to show the world that you are capable of upholding the honour of your name and of your family?'

'These terrible years that must intervene,' he groaned. 'Sometimes I wonder if I shall live through them.'

'Oh yes, you will! You are young and strong. Why should you fear otherwise? I wish you were married, monsieur! and had a nice wife at the château, to make it pleasant and cheerful for you. Then the time of waiting would not seem so long.'

'Where am I to find a wife, mademoiselle, who will consent to bury herself in St. Pucelle, on six thousand francs a year, for the next four years? Tell me, and I will offer her my hand and heart upon the spot.'

Now, I thought, is the time to put in a word for Tessie. His eyes have but to be opened to see all her virtues for himself.

'I know of several,' I answered confidently: 'sweet good girls, who would love you for your own merits, and care nothing about your money. There is Tessie Lovett, for instance. Where could you find a woman that would make a better wife than she?'

His face fell to about a yard long.

'Miss Lovett! the very pale one, you mean, with blond locks. Why, she is like a statue, mademoiselle! She hardly ever opens her mouth. She has no spirit—no *chic* about her. I don't think she would brighten up the old château very much—nor me either, for the matter of that.'

Oh, the insolence of men! I really began to believe they were all alike, and never too miserable nor unfortunate to lose their self-conceit. Here was a young fellow, who had just acknowledged himself to be everything that was bad and wicked, and unworthy the regard of any woman, turning up his nose at one of the best and sweetest creatures God ever made, just because she had not got cheeks as red as peonies, and a tongue that clacked like a water-mill all day!

'Why, she is all the better for not talking!' I exclaimed indignantly. 'Do you mean to tell me that you like a woman who chatters like a magpie?'

'No, mademoiselle. But I like a woman who can converse with me and sympathise with me; who can scold me a little when I do wrong, and advise me for my good; and who is brave and unselfish, and has been brought up by a good mother in whose footsteps she will follow.'

I blushed at this eulogium, because it sounded so much as if it was meant for myself. But I was true to Tessie notwithstanding.

'And how do you know, monsieur, that Miss Lovett is not all that you say?' I inquired.

'I do not know—but I have my opinions.'

'I thought you liked her so much,' I said disappointedly.

'So I do. But I will not *like* my wife, I will *love* her.'

'*Petite* Ange is more sprightly and talkative than her sister,' I observed.

'*Petite* Ange is a lovely child,' he answered: 'nothing more. She is open and innocent as the day. Anyone might deceive her who had the mind to do so. She loves birds and flowers and the poor, and considers *monsieur son père* to be a saint from heaven. *Voilà!* that is *petite* Ange.'

'Do you think she will make the worse wife for being so sweet and innocent?'

'Not for a good man, mademoiselle, who can guide her aright; but I am a bad man who requires guidance. And the woman who can do that must be something very much higher and better than the ordinary run of women.'

'Oh, then you had better marry old Denise,' I said, out of patience with his trifling. 'She is old enough and steady enough to keep you straight, and as she whipped you when you were in petticoats, it will come quite naturally to her.'

How he laughed at the idea! I had never heard Armand de Nesselrode laugh before, but now his voice rang out sweet and clear along the deserted road, and woke the echoes in the hills beyond.

'I am glad you approve of my proposal,' I continued, fain to laugh with him, though I tried hard to prevent it.

'Mademoiselle, you do me too much honour! I have never yet aspired to a Baronne de Nesselrode without a tooth left in her head. Now, have patience whilst I give you a description of the sort of woman I want to win for my wife.'

But something in his eyes alarmed me, and I would not let him speak.

'No, no, no!' I exclaimed hastily, as I jumped up from my grassy seat, and shook the dust from my skirts. 'I don't want to hear it, monsieur: I have not time. It is very late, and I must go home at once. What will they all say when they hear of my adventure?'

'You must not come this way again alone, since you are easily frightened, mademoiselle. But if you will let me know—me only, you understand, it is not necessary we should tell our private affairs to all the world—when you intend to make your promenade upon the Piron road, I will take care to be within call—not to intrude upon your privacy, but to be ready in case you desire to appeal to me for assistance.'

Was he laughing at me, or did he imagine it possible I could permit him to follow at my heels like a dog or a lacquey, waiting to receive my orders? I glanced up at his face, expecting to see a twinkle in his eyes which should prove he was only in jest, but they were solemn as those of a judge. The Baron de Nesselrode, in his beautiful chivalry and devotion to the weaker sex, had been really in earnest in making this offer. But of course I rejected it.

'It is impossible!' I replied. 'You must not dream of such a thing. You would set all St. Pucelle talking about me!'

'You think I would be barbarous enough to take advantage of such a trust by forcing my conversation upon you! Ah, mademoiselle, you do me wrong! No saint in her niche could be farther removed from the annoyance of my presence than you should be, if you thought fit to accept my protection in your solitary rambles.'

'But I shall not come this way again, monsieur, when I am by myself. And I could not think of putting you to all the trouble you propose. I am not used to be attended on, nor to have a *preux-chevalier* at my heels, thank you all the same for thinking of it!'

We were walking back to St. Pucelle together now, through the field-path that I have mentioned. It was a very narrow way; there was scarcely room sometimes for us to walk abreast, and our conversation was necessarily impeded.

'I have not touched a card since the evening that we spoke of it together,' said the Baron presently.

'I thought so, monsieur, and I am so glad to hear it. I am sure you will never regret your determination. How do you employ your evenings now?'

'I read and write and smoke; but I am very lonely. Sometimes I almost think that I shall cut my throat.'

'Hush! don't say that! You hurt me.'

'At first I considered the possibility of turning my talents, such as they are, to account, in any post of responsibility that a gentleman might accept. But whilst I remain under the black cloud of debt, there is no chance of my procuring a Court appointment such as my father held; and the De Nesselrodes have never stooped to anything lower.'

'There is no "stooping" in honest labour, monsieur.'

'I believe you; but caste has its prejudices. No member of my family has ever been a tutor or a secretary; and if I became so, I should cut off all hope of reconciliation with my relations when my term of penal servitude is ended.'

'Cannot you write and employ your time in instructing or amusing others? You can see no degradation in that! Men of the noblest blood have been authors before now.'

'Oh yes! and raised themselves by the distinction. But one must have talents to shine before the world, and I am not clever.'

'Are you not? Mr. Lovett considers you have a mind of a very high order, and having been intimately associated with some of the first in Europe, he ought to be a good judge.'

'He flatters me. But if I have a mind, or any gift for teaching others, I know how I should like to employ it.'

'In what way?'

'You will not be offended, nor say I am very presumptuous?'

'I think not.'

'Then I should like to teach you how to speak French.'

If the evening shadows had not fallen by this time, the Baron would have seen that his remark made me redden. I knew I spoke his language with a horribly Anglicised accent, but I was ashamed to be told so.

'I am quite aware I pronounce it like a barbarian,' I said bluntly.

'Ah, mademoiselle, now I have offended you. You do not speak it like a barbarian. Your voice is very sweet, and makes every word that comes from your mouth sweet also. But there are certain little niceties, the lights and shades of our language, that it is impossible to acquire except from conversing with a Parisian; and it is on these points, unnecessary as they may appear, that I should like to see you perfect. There is so little to correct, it is but a word or an expression here and there that betrays you have not acquired the language abroad; and since I know you have the ambition to speak it well, I thought, if you would permit me, to aid you——'

'Monsieur!' I interrupted him, for my false shame had evaporated by this time, 'pray say no more. I know that my accent and my grammar must set your teeth on edge every time you hear them, and it is very good of you to wish to correct them. I am infinitely obliged, but what am I to say about it? What would your relations think if they heard that a De Nesselrode had turned French tutor to a raw English girl?'

'Let them say what they will! Only say yourself that I may give you a few lessons.'

'But where am I to take them?'

'Here—anywhere—so it be out in the beautiful country, with the blue sky over our heads and the flowers springing around us, and not shut up in a dull room in the house.'

This seemed so much like making appointments with him, that I hardly knew what to answer.

'I cannot agree to meet you at any particular time, monsieur, without telling my guardian. It would not be *comme il faut.* We English girls are allowed more liberty than our French sisters, but to make appointments with gentlemen without the knowledge of our friends is going a little too far. If we meet by accident, however, I shall always be glad to take any hints you may be good enough to give me.'

'I will walk about every day and all day till I *do* meet you,' he replied fervently.

I laughed, but I felt flattered. Why should Armand de Nesselrode take such an interest in my rough unmusical tongue?

'And what are you going to charge for your lessons?' I asked him, jestingly; 'I am not very rich, you know, so you must not lead me into extravagance.'

'*What am I to charge for my lessons!*' he repeated after me slowly. 'Ah! mademoiselle, the price will be very, *very* high, but you shall take your own time to pay me.'

I was just going to ask what he meant, when we came within sight of another couple advancing to meet us. Not really to meet us though, but creeping slowly along the pathway deeply engaged in talk, with their heads close together and their eyes cast on the ground. The Baron and I were walking one after the other, duck fashion, but our two friends were side by side.

'It is Monsieur Charteris!' exclaimed my companion, who had the eye of a hawk.

'*Is* it?' I returned incredulously. 'Are you sure? Who can the lady be?'

As I mooted the question, I thought of Miss Markham. I knew how silly and romantic she was, delighting in moonlight walks and secret assignations, and could imagine how she had waylaid Cave Charteris smoking under the garden wall, and dragged him out into the fields, with his will or against it. A man can hardly refuse a woman's request point-blank to her face.

Silly creature that she was! How could she possibly remain so blind to the fact that her attentions were not agreeable to him!

As I meditated somewhat in this strain, we came right upon the opposition couple before they were aware of our propinquity, and I almost ran into Mr. Charteris's arms.

'Here is an encounter!' I said merrily. The woman by his side lifted her head, and, to my utter astonishment, I saw the beautiful face of Angela Lovett. '*Ange!*' I exclaimed, 'what are you doing where—here is Tessie? Why didn't she come with you?'

There was such a ring of wonder and, I suppose, dissatisfaction in my voice, that Mr. Charteris at once took up the cudgels in defence of his fair companion.

'I think we shall be justified in putting the same question, Miss Marsh. What are *you* doing here, walking alone with Monsieur de Nesselrode?'

'Oh! *our rencontre* was a mere accident,' I replied, with vexation. 'I was on the Piron road when I met a horrid animal, half wolf and half dog, and I thought it was a real wolf and was terribly frightened, and the Baron happened to meet me, and so——'

'Oh! did you see one of those savage-looking sheep-dogs, Hilda dear!' exclaimed Ange, who appeared as ready as myself to drop the subject of the company she had been detected in keeping. 'I do not wonder it alarmed you. I was very nearly bitten by one once. It flew out of a cottage and attacked me. Papa was so frightened, he wanted to have it killed; but it wasn't mad, you know. The village children had been teasing it, and it took fright at a stick I carried in my hand. But I am surprised you have not seen one before. There are so many about St. Pucelle.'

She had left Mr. Charteris's side and linked her arm in mine, and she leaned on me with a confiding pressure which seemed to say, 'Don't tell of me.' I didn't quite like it, and yet it would have been hard to say why I was annoyed, for Ange ran about St. Pucelle as she listed, and gave account of her proceedings to no one.

'Where is Tessie?' I reiterated, looking down into the soft violet eyes that were raised so confidingly to mine.

'At home, dear, reading to papa. It was so hot indoors, I thought I should prefer the fields.'

'Did you come this way to meet me?'

'No! I didn't know where you were. Tessie thought you had gone to see Mrs. Carolus. It is more than two hours since you left home.'

I started guiltily. Put upon my oath to guess the time of my absence, I should really have thought it had been about thirty or forty minutes.

'Let us go back as fast as we can then, Ange, or they will begin to think we have eloped altogether.'

We were both so evidently anxious to have nothing more said about the companions of our pilgrimage, that we talked on every subject but that of our evening stroll, and left the gentlemen to amuse each other in the rear whilst we scuttled home together arm-in-arm, like two rabbits that had taken fright and were hurrying back to the warren.

But after I had retired to rest that night, I could not help thinking of dear little Ange, and wondering how she came to choose Mr. Charteris for her cavalier. I supposed it was very natural she should do so. I had left him smoking sulkily under the garden wall, and when she came out for her evening stroll, he had probably proffered the same request to her that he did to me, and she could hardly have refused him. What nonsense it was to think twice about such a trifle! Yet I did think of it, many more times than twice.

Ange was too good and pious to derive any harm from ordinary intercourse with Cave Charteris, whose opinions on most subjects would be more calculated, I thought, to shock than to charm her; but she was very young and unsophisticated, and her father was far too careless of her. Yet what business was it of mine? The fear of being thought meddlesome has more than once deterred me from doing what I considered right in life. It deterred me now.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE BLACK CLOUD.

I FIND I have arrived at an epoch in my story—an epoch from which I can date a remarkable change in the character of my surroundings—I seemed to have got on the black books of the entire household. In the first place, Mr. Lovett had scarcely spoken to me since the day that I had extracted the twenty-five francs from him wherewith to pay my debt to Mrs. Carolus. Whether he considered my subsequent silence dangerous, or read a determination in my eye which did not accord with his own intentions, I know not; but he assumed a great distance towards me, and never addressed me except it were absolutely necessary. He did not parade his altered feelings before the others, but, all the same, they were evident enough to me. The studied politeness of his manner and the increased blandness of his tone, when we met in public, would have betrayed the truth of themselves to my understanding, had not the ominous silence that reigned between us, whenever we found ourselves alone together, made it still more patent.

My guardian's suspicions or distrust, however, did not seriously affect me. I had a rod in pickle for the old gentleman, and thought it just as well he should be a little prepared for what was coming. But I did think it hard that Tessie should avoid me.

Since the day that we had visited the Fromards' cottage together, I had not breathed a word to her of the disclosures that had been made me there. Poor Guillaume had been taken to his last home. And the funeral *cortége*, followed by half the town, had passed our door without my making the slightest reference to the unpleasant topic which the sight brought to my mind. I had even listened with patience to the beautiful and touching discourse which Mr. Lovett had given us on that occasion, and in which he set forth the folly of the poor in not husbanding their resources against a time of want and emergency.

Tessie had looked painfully shy and uneasy, whilst her father bade us all pray for the bereaved widow and orphans, but I had stood the exordium manfully, although I could have boxed Ange's ears for dilating her eyes as though she were gazing at a saint from heaven.

Yet Tessie shunned my company in the most evident manner, and was very subdued, not to say melancholy, at all seasons. Why was it so? Did she suspect me of treachery, and fear that, notwithstanding my promise, I should enlighten Ange upon the subject? Or had her father represented my conduct to her in his own light, and made her feel resentment on his account? I could not tell. I only knew that something had arisen between us, and we were not on the friendly terms we had been hitherto. Mr. Charteris was another defaulter, though regarding his temper I troubled myself but little. My rebuffs of him, trifling as they were, had evidently upset his equanimity; and if a gentleman who omits none of the common courtesies of society can be called rude, I should have said that Cave Charteris's behaviour to me amounted to rudeness.

Anyway, from that day he devoted himself to outdoor amusements, and scarcely seemed to be in the house for ten minutes together. Last, but not least, dear little Ange began to brood and be melancholy, in common with the rest. The season was not a healthy one, and there was a great deal of fever and sickness amongst the poor people. Perhaps this somewhat accounted for the decrease of brilliancy in her eyes, and lack of power in her limbs. Her slight delicate frame was weakened by the long hot summer, and required the dry frost of winter to brace and set it up again. There was too much feverish colour, I thought, in her cheeks for health, and too much languor in her usually active body.

Tessie did not see it as I did. She said that St. Pucelle was always considered to be rather enervating in the autumn months, and Ange looked much the same us usual. From the 'little maid' herself I could get no satisfactory information. She had become as shy of me as her sister, and seemed quite nervous of being left in the same room.

I began to think I must be a species of Jonah, got aboard by haphazard in this peaceful foreign ark, and that the sooner I was cast forth into the sea the better. Even Monsieur de Nesselrode appeared to have been frightened by my proposal to get him a wife, and to come less often to the house than before.

My only resource was Charlie Sandilands, who had, of course, reappeared upon the scene of action, faithful as ever. Charlie was just that sort of man who might be counted upon to reappear, never mind how often he was snubbed, always amiable and forgiving, and for that very reason he was the sort of man that I never could have submitted my judgment to.

But he was an immense comfort to me at that period, and having once thoroughly knocked the truth into his stupid old head that he could be nothing more, we got on capitally together, and scarcely passed a day without meeting, either in the house or out of it.

I had received an answer to my letter from Mr. Warrington ; one that made me feel both comfortable and uncomfortable at the same time. In it he had enclosed a draft for twenty pounds, with the intimation that for the next few weeks imperative business would keep him in London, but that as soon as it was concluded he should run over to St. Pucelle, and inquire into my money affairs himself.

Meanwhile, he trusted that what he sent would free me from any further annoyance until his arrival. This was just what I had dreaded ; and had it not been for Charlie Sandilands, I should foolishly have written back, and begged Mr. Warrington to try first what he could do by letter. But my friend dissuaded me from interfering in the matter. In the first place, he pointed out that the lawyer must know his own business best ; in the second, that an epistolary war between him and Mr. Lovett would be none the pleasanter for me than a wordy one, and I should be compelled to bear the brunt of it without the weight of Mr. Warrington's presence to back me.

There was much good sense in this advice, which I resolved to take, and Charlie and I had many discussions as we trod the lonely environs of St. Pucelle together, as to what future course of life it would be advisable for me to adopt, for that I should be able to continue in any comfort with the Lovetts after the exposure that must follow the solicitor's visit, I never for a moment anticipated.

Somewhere near Tessie and Ange I resolved if possible to stay, but not under the same roof-tree. Charlie talked of Germany and Italy, and the delight the art treasures of these countries would afford to my æsthetic tastes, but somehow I could not make up my mind to leave St. Pucelle. It was a stupid, pottering little town, true enough, and I knew every inch of it by that time, and I had no ties to keep me there; still, whatever the reason, I always came back to the same decision, that, for the present at least, I did not fancy the idea of quitting it.

One day, on an unusually oppressive afternoon, about the middle of October, I substituted a white cambric dressing-gown for the heavy mourning robes I still wore, and sat down in my own room for a couple of hours' quiet reading. I had been thinking of all the disagreeable things of which I have just written, and resolved to try and banish them from my mind.

Charlie had brought over several cheap novels with him for the nourishment of his mental appetite, and I had greedily pounced upon one of Miss Braddon's, and carried it off for my own delectation. I had met Ange dressed for walking as I entered the corridor, on her way to the kitchen to fetch the basket which she usually carried when visiting the poor, and I had remonstrated with the child for exposing herself to such heat, and prophesied all sorts of fevers and horrors for her if she insisted upon being so obstinate.

But she had only shaken her head at me in reply, and I had considered my good advice wasted, and made myself very comfortable in the society of Miss Braddon. I had heard light steps traverse the corridor and leave the house by way of the garden, and thought what a little saint of love and charity the child was, and how far behind her I came in all things worthy of praise, when the latch of my door was softly raised (all the doors in St. Pucelle were latched instead of locked), and lo! the face of St. Ange, not pale but feverishly red, like the opened heart of a great crimson rose, was thrust silently into view.

'Why, Ange! I thought you had left the house ten minutes ago.'

'No, it was Tessie. I felt so tired that she took the basket from my hands and went instead of me. How cool you look in here, Hilda! The sun is glaring in on the other side of the house till it is like an oven.'

'Come in then, dear, and sit with me. I have got one of the most charming stories that was ever written, here, and if you like I will read aloud to you.'

She almost dragged herself across the room to where I sat. I saw at once that she was not well.

'What is the matter, darling?'

'Nothing in particular, Hilda. Only I have such a headache, and feel so tired.'

'Take my chair, Ange; you will catch the breeze from the hill-top as it blows across the courtyard. It is deliciously cool.'

'No, I would rather sit here,' she answered, as she sunk down upon a stool at my feet and rested her head against my knee.

I read aloud for a few minutes, but I soon found that even Miss Braddon had not the power to-day to chain Ange's wandering thoughts, which, it was plain to see from the expression of her dreamy eyes, were far away from the matter in hand.

'Ange, you are very sad to-day. What makes you so?'

'I *am* a little sad. Jeanne Guillot's little baby Fanchon is dead, and I nursed her the very day she was born. Such a dear, fat little thing she was, Hilda, and only just two years old. I feel almost as if she had belonged to me.'

'What did she die of?'

'I don't know—some kind of fever, I think. Several children in the town are ill with it.'

'Is it safe for you to go amongst them so constantly as you do, Ange?'

'Why?'

'The fever may be infectious—you might catch it yourself.'

'What then, Hilda? One can die but once, you know, and I often think those who die are much better off than those who are left in this world.'

'Perhaps so, but you are too young to believe it. You have all your life before you, child, and should look forward to a sunny one. Why, what has come to my light-hearted laughing Ange this afternoon?'

'I have a headache,' she repeated wearily.

I let her rest in peace then, though I could not help stealing an occasional glance at the marvellously pretty face that was pillowed on my knee. Was it my fancy, or had a look of greater age really come over Ange's childlike features during the last few weeks? I thought her nose seemed longer and thinner than before, and that her brows were not quite so smooth and open as they had been. But it must have been my fancy, or the appearance was merely evanescent. No storm, domestic or otherwise, had occurred to ruffle the even tenor of her life. The unusual look of care must have been the effect of the headache only. It was she who broke the silence between us.

'Hilda, are you going to marry Mr. Sandilands?'

'Marry Charlie Sandilands? certainly *not*, my dear Ange. Whatever can have put such an idea into your head?'

'Miss Markham said you were engaged to him.'

'What rubbish! Pray don't put faith in anything that woman tells you. She has no authority for her assertions. I am not going to marry anybody, Ange; rest sure of that.'

I was vexed at this retailed piece of scandal, nevertheless; though what else could I have expected at the hands of a set of chattering old women, who had seen me walking out every afternoon with the same gentleman?

'I suppose I have no right to be angry,' I continued; 'but it is always vexatious to be talked about. I have known Charlie Sandilands for years, Ange. He is younger than I am, and I look upon him as a brother. Don't let anyone connect our names together again in your presence, will you?'

'No, I will not, Hilda. But I thought Mr. Charteris would be sure to know.'

'You said Sophy Markham had been your informant.'

'So she was, but when I repeated it to Mr. Charteris, he said nothing was more likely.'

'Mr. Charteris ought to know me better,' I returned, with ridiculous heat, considering that I had not condescended to inform that gentleman of any of my private affairs.

It seemed hopeless to engage in conversation that afternoon. Every subject we started came to a dead-lock, and I returned to my novel with an impatient sigh. Presently Madame Marmoret's harsh voice rung out across the courtyard in expostulation with some one unseen.

'*Eh bien!* you are there again, pig! Have you come to bring me what I asked for?'

'Madame sweetly singing, as usual!' I remarked, as the tones reached us.

I suppose my words drowned the reply to the woman's question, for she continued rapidly:

'Lies, as usual! I know you have it! I saw you borrow one hundred and twenty-five francs from Monsieur Sharteris this morning. It cannot be gone already. *Pauvre homme!* he has not yet found out what it is to lend money to those that will never return it!'

'*Tais toi!*' responded the voice of my guardian; 'mind your own business. He will be repaid, never fear!'

'Ah! yes, certainly, when the Lord comes to judgment, replied Madame, sarcastically.

Ange had not appeared to hear the first two sentences as she lay with her head upon my knee, her eyes closed and the deep crimson mantling on her cheek. But when her father's voice was heard in answer, I watched her colour fade to a dull white, and she opened her eyes and knit her brows as though she were listening with all her soul.

'Hilda!' she inquired eagerly, 'is that papa's voice?'

'Yes, Ange, I think so.'

'What was he saying?'

'I don't know. I didn't hear.'

She raised herself and looked at me in a scared, half-comprehending manner.

'You are deceiving me, Hilda! You must have heard! What is it? What does it mean? Did Marmoret say that papa owed Mr. Charteris money?'

I remembered my promise to Tessie, and resolved that Ange should learn the truth through any lips but mine.

'I know nothing about it, Ange,' I repeated firmly; 'you heard what passed just as well as I did. And if it were the case,' I added, with beautiful inconsistency, 'it is no such great matter. Men borrow money of one another constantly.'

'*It is no such great matter!*' she repeated slowly; 'no matter that dear papa should be so poor as to be obliged to borrow of Mr. Charteris: papa, who holds such strict views on all money matters that he thinks people should lie down and starve sooner than beg or borrow of their friends. Oh! we must be very poor indeed—much poorer than I have ever dreamed of—if papa has been obliged to do this thing.'

I saw the proud blood rush back again to her face, though only for a moment, and thought, with a pang, what a blow the disclosure of the truth, when it came, would be to her! At that moment the bedroom door opened, and Tessie appeared. The sight of her sister seemed to rouse Ange to action, for she leapt to her feet and rushed into her arms, crying:

'Tessie! Tessie! tell the truth. Does papa owe money to Mr. Charteris?'

Tessie looked over the child's shoulder at me with a reproachful air, which I read too well.

'You wrong me,' I said, in answer ; 'I am not the delinquent. Ange has overheard your father and Madame squabbling in the courtyard.'

At these words Tessie's face became as white as the 'little maid's.'

'Why did I not tell Madame I was going to carry Ange's basket to the poor?' she said, with a self-condemnatory air.

I knew what she meant. That if Madame had known that *petite* Ange was anywhere within hearing, she would have placed some restraint upon her unruly tongue.

'Well, it cannot be helped, Tessie ; and, after all, Ange is making a great fuss about a very little thing. She merely heard Madame say that Mr. Lovett had borrowed a five-pound note of his boarder.'

'Five pounds, Tessie ; one hundred and twenty-five francs !' said Ange, with open eyes of horror ; 'and how will he ever pay it back again, so poor as we are?'

'Oh ! leave papa to find out the ways and means, darling,' replied Tessie, cheerfully ; 'it is no concern of ours, you know, and he would not like, perhaps, to think that we knew about his private concerns.'

'That is just what I have been telling her, Tessie ; but Ange is such a little goose, she seems to think five pounds a perfect fortune. Gentlemen constantly accommodate each other in such trifles. Mr. Charteris is sure to have his money back in a day or two, and, for my part, I think we have wasted too much time already in discussing the business.'

So I said, in my desire to reassure them both, but Ange still continued to look up in her sister's face with wide, imploring eyes.

'Tessie, how can he pay him back? I heard papa tell the *facteur* this morning that he must wait till to-morrow for the money for the unpaid letter.'

'That was because he had no change,' I interposed quickly.

'Tessie, how will he ever be able to pay back five pounds?' continued Ange, without heeding my interruption; 'there are so many things to buy each day, and Madame killed our best pair of pigeons this morning because she had no money to go to market with.'

'Oh, Ange! you do not understand such things. You have had no experience. People may have very little money to-day and plenty to-morrow. It *comes in*, you know. The richest are sometimes out of pocket for a few days, aren't they, Hilda?'

'Of course,' I answered stoutly. 'I dare say the Duke of Westminster has to borrow sometimes. The more we have, the more we spend. How very much amused Mr. Charteris would be if he could hear the debate we are holding over his stupid bank-note. By the way, is he home from shooting yet, Tessie?'

'I don't know; I have not seen him,' she replied, as she gently put her sister from her, and, walking up to the mirror, removed her hat and arranged her tumbled hair. Ange stood where she had left her for a few seconds motionless, and then, with a deep sigh, walked out of the room.

'Oh, Hilda! how could you let her hear it?' exclaimed Tessie, as soon as she was gone.

'How could I help it, rather? If you will gag Madame Marmoret, or reduce her brazen clarion of a voice to whispering music, I may be able to avoid such things, but not before.'

'How impudent of her to shout in that way across the yard, and why does dear papa provoke her tongue by infringing on her premises? Why doesn't he keep out of her way?'

'Don't ask me. Why does everything in this world go by contraries? The best thing we can do now is to try and make Ange forget what she overheard as soon as possible.'

'Oh! she is sure to forget it. After all, it is not much. The only thing is to prevent its leading to more.'

'You had better arrange that with Madame Marmoret, since she is at the bottom of all the mischief.'

When we met at the dinner-table I thought that Ange had already forgotten the little episode we had alluded to. The lovely damask colour bloomed once more on her cheek; her soft eyes beamed with light, and her manner to her father was even more tender and caressing than usual.

As soon as the meal was concluded, she perched herself upon his knee, and kept on fondling him to an unusual degree as she stroked down his silver locks, calling him 'Poor dear papa,' and 'Poor darling old father,' accompanying each phrase of affection with a kiss.

I fancied that Mr. Lovett palled of this excess of filial devotion, but the girl could not see it. Her little soft heart was full to the brim with compassion for what she considered the deplorable condition to which he had been brought, and she was powerless to perceive that his did not beat in unison with hers.

At last he twitched his venerable head from under her smoothing hands to turn it towards Madame Marmoret, who entered the *salle* with a message from Jean Marat, the cobbler; a humble message, delivered in the most respectful manner, to the effect that if it were quite convenient to Monsieur le Curé, would monsieur oblige Jean Marat with a few francs—just a few francs—on account of his bill, because madame *sa femme* had laid-in that morning of the eighth little Marat, and money, under the circumstances, would be very acceptable.

To listen to Madame's oily voice at that moment, who would have dreamt it could ever be so harsh and virulent as we had heard it at other times!

She looked the personification of a respectable servant as she stood at the open door with her hands rolled up in her apron; and with all my dislike for the woman, I recognised something touching in the restraint she put on her naturally evil nature for the sake of *petite* Ange.

Mr. Lovett, however, saw nothing 'touching' about the matter. His brows contracted as the message was delivered to him, and he put Ange off his lap with a brusqueness that was almost rough.

'What do you mean by bringing such a message in to me in the midst of dinner?' he demanded. 'Tell Jean Marat to go——'

But there he remembered himself and came to a full stop. Whatever he may have been in private, he was always very particular in keeping up the name of his profession in public.

'Tell Jean Marat that it is *not* convenient, that I am occupied at present—and he must wait,' he continued, correcting the former sentence.

'If monsieur could spare but five francs,' pleaded Marmoret. 'The Marats are very poor.'

'*Ciel!*' exclaimed Mr. Lovett, losing his temper entirely. 'What do you mean by talking to me in that manner when I haven't got a five-franc piece in the house? Give it to them yourself if you are so anxious for their comfort; but get out of this room, and leave me in peace to finish my repast.'

Madame Marmoret immediately disappeared, and harmony was restored amongst us. But an ominous silence succeeded her departure.

Tessie sat with eyes downcast upon her lap. Mr. Charteris whistled and looked out of the window. Ange seemed restlessly miserable.

The cause of the disturbance tried to cheer up the spirits of his family, but, finding his remonstrances of no avail, took his hat and stick discontentedly and walked off to visit some of his friends.

The girls disappeared together, as I thought, to their garden or the kitchen, and I retreated to the inner *salle* to have another chat with Miss Braddon. When it grew too dusk to read I went upstairs, intending to finish some needlework or writing in my bedroom by the light of a little lamp which I had purchased for my own use with some of the money Mr. Warrington had sent me. But, passing the room occupied by the sisters, my attention was arrested by the sound of a low sobbing, and I entered it expecting to find my poor friend Tessie bewailing in secret the troubles she had to bear. To my surprise, however, it was not Tessie who was cast prostrate on the bed. It was Ange!

'Ange, my child!' I exclaimed. 'What is the matter that you should weep like this!'

'Oh! don't speak to me, Hilda,' she said mournfully; 'leave me to myself. It seems as if a great black cloud had come down over everything.'

Poor Ange! Dear, innocent Ange!

So the curse had begun to work here also, and her fresh young life was to be involved in trouble like the rest.

CHAPTER XXV.

SALLE DU SABBAT.

HOW we all came to visit the *Grottes de S. Jean* in one large party, I never quite made out, but the fact remains that we went. Some one proposed it, probably Miss Markham (for that gay young creature was always on the alert to concoct a plan by which she should secure the privilege of Mr. Charteris's company), and some one agreed to it, but neither of them was I.

I found myself one morning in the centre of a group consisting of Mr. and Mrs. Carolus, Sophy Markham, Arthur Thrale and Charlie Sandilands, Cave Charteris, and Ange and Tessie, all habited in walking costumes, and armed with thick sticks, ready to start on an expedition to these famous grottoes of stalactites, and I was told to put on my hat and accompany them.

There was no particular interest to me in the expedition; indeed, had I been given my choice, I would much rather have stayed at home on the chance of getting a lesson in French from the Baron de Nesselrode—the public will see that I am frank in these records, even to detailing my errors of judgment—but consciousness that it was so, and that I showed weakness in encouraging it, urged me to the opposite course, and I agreed, with alacrity, to do all that they required of me. So in a few minutes we had started on our way. Sophy Markham clinging close, of course, to Charteris's side, as Charlie Sandilands did to mine, and the rest walking, as Ange expressed it, *heegledy-peegledy.* How well I remember that morning: we were all so terribly young. Mrs. Carolus skipped round and about her Willy, whom, more than once, she nearly knocked over in her airy evolutions, as a bride of sixteen might have done; whilst Miss Markham hung upon Charteris's arm and gazed up into his face with the rapture of a first attachment. The boys caught the youthful infection, and raced Tessie and me down the green slopes we had to traverse, until I told them they reminded me of Greenwich fair. Of all the company only two seemed unequal to taking part in the general hilarity. These two were Cave Charteris and *petite* Ange.

He walked along with his head in the air, without appearing to take much interest in the conversation of his self-elected companion. Did he or did he not care for the attentions which this woman was always pressing upon him? To love her I was quite sure would be impossible to him—the great difference in their ages alone would render it most unlikely—but he had certainly been more polite and amiable to her lately than he had ever been before.

What motive could he have for it? for I was certain Cave Charteris never did anything without a motive. Did he entertain any thoughts of marrying her? Miss Markham was reported at that time to have money, and Madame Marmoret had more than once openly expressed her disgust to see the lady's favours transferred to the wrong quarter. But Mr. Charteris had told me he was rich; he could never be so mean as to sell his liberty to an old woman when he was not even in want of pecuniary assistance. Yet on what other grounds, except the desire to ingratiate himself with her, could one account for his former rudeness being changed to a curt familiarity? The other dullard of our party, dear Ange, was not so melancholy as she was silent. The burst of grief she had given way to, now more than a week ago, had been succeeded by an unusually subdued manner—an *older* manner if I may express it so. It was as if the discovery of that day had swept her youth away before it. So I believed, at least, then—now I know that subtler influences were at work to destroy her gaiety.

I tried on that morning, by every means in my power, to make Ange like her former self, but it was in vain. She laughed, it is true, and when we pulled her down the steep hills, the crimson blood mantled in her peachy cheeks and made her beautiful, but there was a sense of care underlying the laughter that spoilt the joyousness of its echo, and the colour faded too fast after each exertion to have been called there by healthy exercise.

The grottoes we were about to visit extended for a great distance under the grounds of Monsieur de Condé, whose property they were, and who charged a certain sum for admission to them. They had been discovered by some workmen whilst excavating on his estate, and had been quite a source of profit to their owner ever since. The visitors to St. Pucelle, naturally, had already heard a great deal about these famous grottoes, and Sophy Markham 'gushed' over them to her heart's content.

'Oh! I am so *anxious* to see them! I am anticipating so much pleasure from this little excursion!' she exclaimed, with a violent and most palpable squeeze of Mr. Charteris's arm. 'I have been looking over the book in the hotel where visitors have written down their impressions of them, and they are so terribly tantalising. A Persian describes himself as having been suddenly transported into fairyland—didn't he, Lizzie dear?—positively into fairyland, and says he can compare the vast caverns to nothing but the palace of his great master the sultan, and the forms of the stalactites to lovely houris frozen around him. Isn't it poetical? *Frozen houris!* Oh! I do love poetry so! It is the very life of my soul.'

Tessie laughed quietly.

'I'm afraid if you do not lessen your anticipations, Miss Markham, that you will be disappointed. I went over the grotto years ago with some friends, but I saw nothing at all like "frozen houris" there.'

'Ah! but then, my dear Tessie, you are not imaginative. Now, I *am*. I always have been, and it is my *métier* to make the very best of everything I see. You don't blame me for it, or think me foolish, Mr. Charteris, do you?'

Of course Mr. Charteris assured her that folly and herself were the two things in his ideas farthest removed from one another, and just as he had given vent to this opinion, we came in sight of the mouth of the grotto, where two *guides*, each bearing a petroleum lamp, awaited our arrival. They tendered us little hats made of grey linen, each trimmed with a cockade and a bunch of red feathers in front, very much after the pattern of those adopted by the monkeys on the organs, and for which we were expected to exchange those we wore, which were liable to be damaged by the drippings from the cave.

They were comical-looking head-dresses, and I hardly wondered at Mrs. Carolus and the fair Sophia hesitating to surmount their hard-lined and puckered faces by them, although Ange and Tessie looked all the prettier from the contrast.

Miss Markham in particular, I could see, would rather have spoiled a dozen hats than assumed the unbecoming linen one, had she not been ridiculed into doing so.

'Oh! Lizzie dear, we never *can* wear such things—now can we?'

'I'm sure I don't know, dear. I'd much rather keep on my bonnet, but then it cost five guineas, and I shall be crazy if it gets hurt. I really think I must venture to try one of the caps.'

'Oh! my dear girl, you do look so comical! Excuse my laughing—but you've no idea—and grey never did suit your complexion, you know.'

'Well, I don't think you need talk, Sophy. So plain a head-dress is by no means suited to your own style of features, I can tell you!'

'Oh! the horrid thing—I will never, never wear it!' cried the childish Sophia, as she threw the offending cap upon the ground; and I believe, if she had not overheard Mr. Charteris grumble at being kept waiting so long, that she would have been as good as her word.

But, finding that we were all wearing them and she would be singular if she did not do the same, she consented at last to crown her *chignon* with it, and came simpering forth like a bashful girl that was afraid of being looked at.

No one troubled her, however, and the whole party being ready, we began to descend the first flight of wooden steps, which were steep but easy, and went down, down, down, until the ivy and fern covered entrance was left far above us, and we had reached the very centre of the cave, which was yet light enough to let us see that there were several more such flights to be descended before we could touch level earth again.

This was a fine opportunity for Miss Markham and Mrs. Carolus to shriek and laugh hysterically, and cling like grim death to whoever happened to be nearest to them, and they made every use of it. But Mr. Charteris and Mr. Carolus had been wise in their generation, and insisted upon going down first, leaving their women-kind to struggle in the rear with any-one they could lay hold of. So poor Charlie and Arthur Thrale had them all to themselves, whilst Tessie and I laughed wickedly in each others' ears.

At last we stood on level ground, in a cavern as dark as Erebus; there was no light anywhere, except from the lamps of the guides, who waved them over their heads and introduced us to *la grande salle.* I looked up and down and round about me; but all was black as pitch. I felt that I was standing on broken flints and thick mud, and as the guides' lamps threw their faint gleam here and there, I perceived that the cave we stood in was very vast and damp, and uncommonly like a huge cellar, but I can't say that I saw anything more.

'Are these the "frozen houris?"' asked Cave Charteris, sarcastically.

'Oh no! I should hardly think so,' replied Miss Markham, quickly; 'and—where are you, Mr. Charteris? I feel so dreadfully timid, I can't tell you—and would give anything to have hold of the hand of some one that I knew!'

'Take mine!' I said, with *malice prepense;* 'it's quite strong enough to keep you from slipping.'

'Oh no! I couldn't think of it. I might fall and pull you down with me. But if Mr. Charteris would help me——'

'All right! You can take my arm if you wish it. But we can't walk abreast through the passages,' he answered, with anything but lover-like alacrity, and something made me turn to Ange and whisper :

'Are you not frightened, dear, too? If so, I can hold you up.'

But she said calmly :

'There is nothing to be frightened of, Hilda. We are on the solid ground now, and can fall no lower.'

In another minute the guides had turned and led us through a passage cut in the rock. We were not going up nor down stairs now, but picking our way over slippery stones, and between places sometimes so narrow and so low, that gaunt Mr. Carolus knocked his head more than once, as he disregarded the guides' warning cry of '*Tête!*' and the majority of us got bruised arms and shoulders. Every now and then we came upon a larger excavation which was called a *salle*, and bore some name consequent on the likeness assumed by the stalactites it contained. One was termed *Salle de Brahma*, because it held a lump of crystal somewhat resembling the idol of that name. Another *Salle du Sacrifice*, its principal attraction being a large flat stone, at the foot of which was another, shaped like a sausage and entitled *tombeau de la victime.*

We paced after the guides through these cavernous passages for what appeared to me to be miles, my mind, meanwhile, being divided between fear that I should leave my best pair of boots behind me in the slushy clay, and apprehension as to the appearance my crape would present when I reached home again.

I heard Mrs. Carolus, every now and then, querulously complaining to 'Willy' of the pains she was acquiring in her back from the constant stooping, and I knew that Sophy Markham was dogging Mr. Charteris's steps as closely as the circumstances would admit of, and that Tessie and Ange plodded behind me silent and uncomplaining.

I was beginning to think that we had come on a very foolish expedition, and were likely to have more pain than pleasure for our trouble, when I found we were ploughing our way up again, on fungus-covered ladders and wet slippery stairs upon which it was most difficult to keep a footing, until we arrived at what was decidedly the finest sight there, the *Salle du Sabbat.* Here the guides proposed to send up a spirit balloon, in order to show us the height and extent of the vast cavern, and went away, taking the lamps with them, having first planted us in a row on the edge of a precipice, and conjured us not to stir until their return. I think we felt little inclination to do so. The blackness about us was so thick that we could almost *feel* it, and the silence was that of death. Ange slipped her little hand in mine, and whispered :

'Hilda, suppose they should never come back !' and I could not say the supposition was a pleasant one. She had been standing between Sophy Markham and myself, but as she said the words, she slipped round my back and linked her arm in mine on the other side.

Miss Markham, for a wonder, was silent, but Mrs. Carolus was plaintively trying to make her spouse partake her girlish fears, and he was ridiculing them with a kind of rough good sense that made me laugh. Under cover of their expostulations with one another, a mouth approached my ear on the side left vacant by Ange, and I heard a voice say gently :

'My own darling ! How much I love you !'

The announcement took me so completely by surprise, that, for the moment, I imagined it had proceeded from Charlie Sandilands, and it was quite a mercy that, under cover of the darkness, I did not turn round and smartly box his ears in return for his impudence. But before I had had time to prepare the weapon of chastisement, the speaker continued, still in the same soft tones :

'What a nuisance it is having to play propriety before all these bores ! How I long to be alone with you again, and able to tell you what I feel !'

Before this sentence was concluded, I had recognised the voice as that of Cave Charteris, and was bristling with indignation.

'What do you mean by speaking to me like that ?' I said angrily.

Good God, Hilda !' he rejoined, 'is it you ?'

'Yes, it is I ! Who did you take me for ?'

'Then—where—where——' he stammered, in order to give himself time to think of what to say, 'where is Miss Markham ?'

We had both raised our voices in our mutual surprise, and his last question was overheard.

'Here I am, Mr. Charteris !' ejaculated the fair Sophy, from his other side—I know she had shifted her quarters in hopes of extracting some familiarity from him before the lights came back. 'Close to you—see !'

The order to 'see' was apparently accompanied by a playful pinch, for Charteris gave a sudden yell, and a step forward that might have sent him over the precipice.

'Do be careful, Miss Markham,' I exclaimed, with an expression of annoyance, 'and keep your facetiæ until we stand on safer ground. You might have caused Mr. Charteris to make a false step.'

'Oh, you needn't be so alarmed, Miss Marsh,' she answered meaningly; 'I assure you I am quite as anxious for Mr. Charteris's safety as you can be, and I should think you had quite enough to do to look after Mr. Sandilands, without troubling yourself about other people!'

'I don't know what you mean,' I retorted; but at that moment the spirit balloon rose in the air, and half a dozen voices joined in a chorus of admiration at the height and depth and length and breadth of the cavern we stood in, and the glittering clusters of stalactites which the light momentarily revealed as it majestically sailed past them. I looked with the rest, but my thoughts were far away from the scene around me. A question was puzzling my brain which I felt I could not give up until I had unravelled. *For whom* had Cave Charteris intended the whisper which by mistake he addressed to me?

It worried me all the way home, and long after I had reached it. His subsequent query seemed to imply that he had believed Sophy Markham stood next him, but I could not credit that he had said those words except with the intent to mislead me. Was it possible that he could have seriously called Miss Markham by such a term of endearment, or addressed her with so much earnestness in his voice? And if it were not possible, then—did he intend that speech for Ange, who would have been standing between us had she not slipped round to my other side at the very moment we were left in darkness?

Cave Charteris and Ange! The very combination of names seemed like sacrilege in my ears. The man who had made love to me, and left me in years gone by—who had tried to make love to me only a few weeks back—to have the happiness of that innocent trusting child in his hands! It was too horrible to think of. Whatever his protestations or passions for the moment might be, he was cold and cruel by nature. I could read it in his eyes and the sentiments in which he expressed his opinions, and I trembled to think what Ange's fate might prove, if he aroused all her deepest feelings, and then basely deserted her as he had deserted me. What was I to do? What was it my duty to do—both towards her and him? If the sentences I heard were meant for Ange, it was not the first time Mr. Charteris had addressed her as a lover. That was evident.

'My own darling!' he had said, 'how much I love you!'

Men don't call women their 'own' until they have proved they are willing to be so. I knew enough of human nature to know that. And then he had added, 'How I long to be alone with you *again*,' which showed that whoever he spoke to had already kept appointments with him.

Oh! could it—could it be our little Ange? All my knowledge of her childish manner, her shyness and her modesty, seemed to refute the suspicion as an impossibility; but it was still more impossible to believe that Mr. Charteris had seriously addressed those lover-like speeches to old Sophy Markham. My mind became distracted in its ignorance what to think, and how to act. If he were making love to Ange, I felt as if, at all risk, I ought to fly to her rescue; but if he were only making fun of Miss Markham's undisguised *penchant* for himself, why, my interference would appear very ridiculous, and bring not only discredit on me as a busybody and meddler, but perhaps lay me open to a false inference of jealousy.

It was evening—nine or ten o'clock—and I was sitting in my own room, leaning my elbows on the open window-sill, and gazing up into the starless sky. The night was very dark—I remember thinking *how* dark, as I sat and mused there, sadly. I had seen Madame Marmoret, arrayed in her best gown, with her scarlet shawl across her shoulders, her gold earrings dangling from her ears, and the broad strings of her snow-white cap pinned carefully together at the back of her neck, leave the courtyard some time ago, on a visit of ceremony, I presumed, to some of her friends. I knew that Mr. Lovett was busily engaged in the *salle* playing *écarté* with Monsieur Condé, who had looked in to hear if we had enjoyed our visit to his immortal grotto: and I had left Tessie and Ange ironing their father's shirts in the kitchen. Mr. Charteris I was unable to account for, as he had left the house immediately after dinner, and was probably smoking the calumet of peace with his friend Monsieur de Nesselrode, or perhaps repeating the words which so much troubled me for the benefit of Miss Sophy Markham.

Whose then was the figure, decidedly a man's, which had just entered the courtyard by way of the stables and cow-house, and leant up against the wall outside the kitchen-door? He was smoking a cigar, for I could distinguish the red light as he blew the thin wreaths of smoke into the air; but that was no guide to his personality, since every man in St. Pucelle enjoyed the same privilege. The kitchen window was full in view from where I sat, but the shutters were closed, so I could not see if the girls were still at work within or no. But why did not the stranger, whoever he might be, knock for admittance? Could he have entered the yard with any nefarious intentions? In another moment I am sure I should have spoken to him, had not the kitchen-door opened suddenly, and a second figure stepped out into the darkness.

'Don't stay here!' said a tender voice, which I recognised at once; 'I cannot come to you. Tessie wants me in the little *salle!*'

'Cannot my angel spare me *one* minute?' asked Cave Charteris.

'No! not one, until to-morrow! You will not try to keep me now, will you?'—imploringly, as if to say that if he *did* try, he would certainly succeed—'because they might hear of it and be angry.'

'You shall do just as you think best, my darling, on one condition.'

'What is that?'

'That you tell me you love me before you go—I cannot sleep without it.'

I could not see, but I fancied, from her stifled tones, that he had clasped his arms about her.

'Oh! my love! my love!' she repeated fervently; '*I do love you!*'

And then she slipped away and closed the kitchen-door softly, and after an interval of half a minute I heard the other figure step carefully across the paved court and pass into the open street again.

And I turned from the window and sank down on my knees beside my bed, and prayed for a long, long time, for *petite* Ange and for myself, and judgment to know what best to do.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MASTER FRED.

THE reverie which followed this, to me, astounding revelation resulted in the decision that it was my duty to tell Mr. Lovett what I had overheard. I hardly know, at this period, whether I did right or wrong—whether I should have shown more wisdom in speaking to Tessie or to Ange herself—whether, in fact, any other course of action could have averted the calamity that so quickly followed it. But it can be well understood how difficult a part I had to play in warning my friends against the man who had wronged me. A thousand times during that night I told myself that I could not do it; that my motives would be misinterpreted, and that if Cave Charteris had failed in his allegiance to me, it was no reason he should be untrue to Angela Lovett. She evidently liked him. No girl of her modesty and virtuous bringing up could have said the words I had heard her say unless she meant them from the bottom of her heart. Yet she was so easily deceived. She was so much too credulous of the goodness of human nature to be fit to judge for herself.

Had it been Tessie whom Charteris had selected for his attentions, I should have left them to their own devices. Tessie knew something of the world: her eyes had been opened to a part, at least, of its iniquity; but Ange was a perfect child, both in mind and experience. The complete faith she put in her father's saintliness was a proof of this, and I felt sure, upon reviewing the discovery I had made, that she would never have kept her relations with Mr. Charteris a secret from those she so much loved and trusted, had he not brought some powerful motive to bear upon her reticence.

What could he have said to persuade this child, who was all frank, ingenuous simplicity, that it was right to hold secret appointments with himself? And why, if his intentions towards her were what they should be, had he not at once avowed them to Mr. Lovett? He was free and independent—at liberty to choose a wife as he listed—and he could have no fear that the poverty-stricken minister would object to see one of his daughters well provided for.

The more I thought of it, the more I felt persuaded that something was wrong. A terrible fear took hold of me that Ange was in similar danger to that I had passed through—perhaps worse, Heaven only knew. And when daylight dawned I had made up my mind, whatever happened, to inform my reverend guardian of what I had seen and heard.

The task was anything but a pleasant one. As I have already mentioned, since the adventure of the twenty-five francs, I had had little or nothing to say to Mr. Lovett, and I saw that he regarded me with suspicion and dislike. It was for the sake of Ange alone that I conquered my aversion to enter upon any but general topics with him, and small thanks as I expected to receive in return for my moral courage, the event proved that I had over-rated the little interest he had left in me.

Breakfast was over, and the moment had arrived in which to attack him. Ange, who had been looking unusually pale and languid during the meal, and had scarcely eaten anything, announced her intention of spending the morning with Jeanne Guillot, the mother of the little child that had died of fever, though I wronged the poor girl by believing that she was going to walk with Cave Charteris instead.

'Why do you let your sister go to those infected cottages?' I demanded, almost sharply, of Tessie; 'you had much better keep her at home. She will catch her death there some day, and then you will be sorry.'

Tessie regarded me with mild surprise.

'Why, Hilda, the fever is not infectious! The doctor says it is purely due to the effects of the long dry summer we have had! And where should Ange be, but amongst those who have suffered from it? The people would not know what had come to St. Pucelle if they missed *petite* Ange from their sides when they were in trouble.'

'Oh! very well! Do as you choose, but don't blame me afterwards,' I responded curtly; for I felt very sore on the subject, and was ready to think Tessie a fool for not being more alive to the moral and physical risks which her sister ran.

They all disappeared after this, and I would not inquire even where they were going. Mr. Lovett and I were left alone in the *salle*, and I might have spoken to him, perhaps, without interruption, but I wished him to attach as much importance as possible to the communication I was about to make.

'Mr. Lovett,' I commenced, 'I have something of the greatest consequence to tell you. When will it be convenient for you to listen to me?'

I suppose he thought I was going to speak again about my money-matters, for I could see the impatient jerk of the shoulders with which he answered:

'I can anticipate what you are about to say, my dear Hilda; and can assure you that as soon as your dividends——'

'No, no, it is not that!' I interrupted eagerly. 'I don't want money, because Mr. Warrington has sent me some to go on with.'

I am afraid this was a false move. I saw that my guardian took it in anything but good part by the way in which he frowned at me.

'So you have applied to Mr. Warrington on the subject.'

'I did not ask him for any money, if that is what you mean. He sent it me spontaneously. But that has nothing to do with my present business. Can I speak to you alone?'

'You can say what you wish, although I cannot imagine what else of a private nature you can have to communicate to me.'

'You will soon find out. But I cannot tell it to you here, with every door and window open.'

'This is very strange,' he remarked. 'Where would you have me go?'

'Will you come into my bedroom, or may I accompany you in your walk?'

'The last will be the least remarkable proceeding,' he replied, as he rose to find his hat and stick.

In a few minutes we were on the high-road together. When it came to the point I found it very difficult to begin; but I had made up my mind that I was right, and was determined to go through with it.

'Mr. Lovett,' I said, 'do you approve of confession?'

'Well, that is rather a difficult question to answer. I approve of it for the Church of which it forms a law, but not for its own particular merits.'

'But do you hold with the sacredness of its obligations to secrecy?'

'Certainly.'

'Then will you consider that what I am about to tell you is under the seal of confession, and promise me beforehand to keep my communication private?'

'If it relates to yourself, I will.'

'I only claim your secrecy on behalf of myself. You have heard that Mr. Charteris and I knew each other many years ago; and perhaps I ought to have told you before now, Mr. Lovett, that in those days he professed to be attached to me.'

'I don't see what business that is of mine, my dear Hilda.'

'Yes, it is your business, because he greatly deceived me, and you have daughters whom he might treat in the same manner. For months my mother and I believed that Cave Charteris intended to marry me; but it all came to nothing, and for many years his desertion was the source of my bitterest trouble.'

'In that case, I should think the less you say about it the better; and I cannot at all imagine why you should have chosen to make me the confidant of so unpleasant a portion of your history.'

There was so much coldness and selfishness in his words, so little sympathy or interest in his voice, that I looked at him with astonishment. Was this the bland, soft-toned old gentleman whom I had heard talking with such benign pity and charity for all mankind, and who now had apparently not one syllable of compassion or reproach for the heartless marring of a young girl's life? I was so angry with him for the manner in which he had received my communication, that I did not care what I said.

'Then I will tell you, sir,' I went on hotly. 'The reason I have troubled you with an account of my sufferings at Mr.

Charteris's hands, is because I have every reason to believe that he is carrying on the same game with your daughter Ange.'

Mr. Lovett stopped short in his walk, and, leaning on his stick, turned round and regarded me fully. I can recall the cold light in his blue eyes, and the fixed look of his marble features as he did so, to this day.

'What proofs have you to advance for the truth of what you say?' he demanded, in the most frigid tones.

'I was sitting at my bedroom window last night when they met in the courtyard. I could not help overhearing their conversation, and I am quite convinced that he is persuading Ange to love him. I lay awake all night, thinking what was best for me to do; and I decided that, at all events, you ought to be told of what is going on between them.'

'You lay awake all night, you mean, plotting how you might best destroy an innocent young girl's happiness, in revenge for having missed your own.'

'Oh, Mr. Lovett!' I cried, horrified at the interpretation he had put upon my words. 'How can you think so! I love Ange dearly: I would do anything to secure her happiness; and as for my own, it is very long since it was connected with Cave Charteris. I believe him to be neither good nor true. I do not consider he is capable of making any girl happy; and all I beg of you is to watch over Ange, and to see he does not each her what is wrong. If he is an honourable suitor, why should he not make known his wishes concerning her to you?'

'I am not prepared to discuss such delicate questions with a young lady, and one who evidently bears no goodwill towards the supposed offender. You seem to have overlooked one thing, Miss Marsh, in mentioning Mr. Charteris : and that is, that you were speaking of a friend of mine.'

'Is it possible you are going to take his part against your own child !' I exclaimed, in amazement.

'I have yet to be convinced that I *am* taking it against my own child. All the information I have received has come through a woman who, by her own account, has every motive for jealousy, and is an eavesdropper into the bargain.'

'Thank you, Mr. Lovett !' I said grandly. 'I am much obliged to you for your good opinion. I shall not soon forget that I tried to do you a benefit, and you credited me with the worst of feelings in return. I see what I believe to be wrong, and I tell you of it, simply from a sense of duty, and a desire to preserve your daughter from a similar fate to mine. But since you choose to misinterpret my meaning in so gross a manner, I shall interfere no further in the matter.'

'I beg you will *not*,' he replied sternly. 'I have every faith in the honour of Mr. Charteris and of my daughter, and require no assistance in looking after their interests.'

'You resent my confidence, then, as an insult.'

'I cannot help seeing that it has been actuated by lower motives than you would have me believe. I do not discredit what you have told me ; but I am perfectly content to leave such things to Providence and the good principles in which Ange has been brought up.'

'You wish her, in fact, to marry Cave Charteris ?'

'I know nothing as yet to make me *not* wish it.'

'You do not consider his dishonourable conduct to myself any drawback to his becoming the lover of Ange ?'

I should like, before I pronounced any opinion on the subject, to be assured that you did not deceive yourself in the matter. Young women are sometimes apt to make a mistake about gentlemen's attentions. And even if you are right, by your own showing it happened several years ago, and we may charitably conclude that Mr. Charteris's character has strengthened and improved during the interval.'

'I am very sorry I took the trouble to speak to you,' I said bitterly.

And I was exceedingly sorry. I had meant to do good, and I had done nothing but harm. Mr. Lovett evidently liked the idea of Cave Charteris entangling himself with Ange, and perhaps he had even seen what was going on and encouraged it; and I stood in the despicable light of an eavesdropper and scandalmonger, who was actuated by jealousy to play the spy! I could have cried with vexation and indignation, and, indeed, for a while I had not sufficient command over myself to continue the conversation.

'There is one thing I must request of you, my dear Hilda,' Mr. Lovett went on mildly: 'and that is, not to mention this subject to my daughter. It is neither necessary nor delicate—and, in fact, I must forbid it.'

'You need not be afraid, sir. I shall never interfere with anything concerning either of them again.'

'That is right. It would vex Tessie beyond measure to hear her sister's actions discussed in this free manner, and it might ruin Ange's prospects for life.'

'I shall leave you to manage them both for the future without any assistance from me,' I said, turning away, 'but, mark my words, Mr. Lovett, you will live to regret this day.'

As I walked homewards by myself I wondered I had been so bold, but I would not have said one word less had the interview come over again. I read the old man's selfishness at a glance. He was afraid of losing Charteris as a boarder and money-lender if he brought him to book for his actions, and he preferred to risk his innocent little daughter's happiness to giving up a few of his creature-comforts.

How despicable and mean he appeared to me as I reviewed the conversation that had just taken place between us.

I was hurrying home, with my eyes on the ground and my thoughts all engrossed with the subject in hand, when I was attracted by a loud shouting and hallooing, and, looking up, perceived some one in front of me, long and lanky, waving his arms round and round like a windmill.

'Hollo, Miss Marsh! don't you know me?' he exclaimed; and then I recognised my youthful companion of the steamboat, Master Frederick Stephenson.

'Why, Master Fred, is that really you?' I said, as I shook hands with him. 'I believe you have grown, even in the short time since I saw you. And does your cousin expect you? He said nothing to us about it.'

'Expect me! Not he, the scrubby fellow! He promised a dozen times that he'd ask me over here for a day's shooting, and I've written almost every week to remind him, but 'twas no go. So I got old Felton to give me a holiday, and took French leave; and here I am, and if Cave don't like it, he can do the other thing, for I don't mean to go back till my time's up.'

'And when will that be?'

'Last train this evening; but I say, by Jove! Miss Marsh, how jolly you look! You're twice as fat as you were when we crossed over together, and you've got such a colour. You're first-rate, you are.'

'Am I?' I said, hardly able to help laughing at the rough compliment, though I felt so sad. 'I am glad you think so, Fred, for I would much rather look nice to my friends than nasty.'

'Well, you do look nice, then, and no mistake. And are both the Miss Lovetts at home?'

'Yes.'

'I'm in luck, by George! won't that beggar Charteris be surprised to see me walk in! I'd a mind to show him I was not going to be humbugged in that way. He thought he'd keep all the fun to himself, I suppose.'

'I am afraid you have not come on a shooting-day—at least, I heard nothing about it this morning.'

'I don't mind. I'd rather stay with you. Is that the house? It *is* pretty! Just like an old Swiss châlet. And, by the way, Miss Marsh, how do you get on with old Lovett?' concluded the young gentleman, with a peculiar twinkle in his eye.

'Oh! very well. How should I get on with him?'

'Isn't he a good, pious, benevolent, amiable old gentleman, eh? Isn't he self-denying, and prudent, and saving, and all that sort of thing?'

'Hold your tongue, sir,' I replied, 'and don't speak in that way of your betters.'

For all the windows and doors were open, and I had no wish that Tessie or Ange should overhear the remarks of my impudent young friend.

'My *betters!*' reiterated Master Fred. 'Oh! come now, Miss Marsh, do draw it mild.'

'I hope you are not going to indulge us with that sort of schoolboy slang all dinner-time, or you will shock the Miss Lovetts,' I told him, 'and if I am not much mistaken, you will offend your cousin also.'

'Ah ! the elegant and accomplished Cave. Yes, I shouldn't wonder if I did, and it would not be the first time either. But I see his cropped flaxen poll bobbing up at the window. By Jove ! didn't he look black when he caught sight of me ! I'm in for it, Miss Marsh, and no mistake ; but I rather like a row than otherwise. There's so little excitement about here, that one's digestion is ruined for want of it.'

'Oh ! I hope you won't have a row,' I replied ; but when we entered the *salle*, where Mr. Charteris was seated with the two girls, I was really afraid Master Fred's prophecy would come true. I could not account for the extreme annoyance that clouded his cousin's face at the sight of him. It could not have arisen simply from the fact of the boy having made his appearance without leave, and yet one would have thought he had committed the most serious offence by doing so.

'Well, Cave, you don't look over and above pleased to see me !' exclaimed the lad, as soon as he had renewed his acquaintance with the Lovett girls.

'I can't say I am. Why didn't you wait till I sent for you, instead of running over in this unceremonious fashion ?'

'Wait till you sent for me ! I fancy I might have waited till the crack of doom, in that case. Why, how much longer do you intend to remain here yourself ?'

'I don't know, and it's no concern of yours,' replied Charteris, with visible annoyance.

'Of course not ! You're your own master, and the longer you stay away the better, at least for those at home.'

'Now, Fred, I don't want any of your nonsense. Please to understand that.'

'I can't give you sense if I haven't got it. But my dad writes me word that they've a clean bill of health down at Parkhurst now, and that Mary is very anxious to see you back again.'

If Charteris had been suddenly shot he could hardly have jumped up more quickly than he did at these words.

'Fred, my boy!' he exclaimed with a total change of manner, 'don't you want to have a little shooting in the forest?'

'Well, of course I do, if it's possible! But I didn't expect to get it, as I came out without warning.'

'I should like to oblige you if I can, but if we are to do anything we must start at once. I left my guns up at the château, and we must call for them on our way. Are you game for a long walk, Fred?'

'Pretty well! but is there any such hurry?' Can't we get an hour or two after *goûter?* I'm no great shakes with a gun, you know, Cave—not a bigwig like you or the Baron—so that I dare say I shall have had enough of it long before you have. And I'm so hungry.'

'Bother your hunger! we can get something up at the château. If you want to shoot, say so; and if you don't, you'd better go back to Rille, for there's no other amusement for you at St. Pucelle.'

I could not imagine why he should be so cross with the lad, and Tessie and Ange seemed as puzzled as myself. Fred Stephenson was nothing but a boy—troublesome, no doubt, and often saucy, as boys will be—but a frank, gentlemanly young fellow that no man need have been ashamed to own as a relation. As Mr. Charteris spoke to him in the rough way related, he stood silent for a moment, and then said, with a kind of nervous laugh :

'There's evidently no room for me here, so perhaps I should be wiser to go back.'

'No, no !' I urged ; 'stay and shoot. Mr. Charteris only wants you to make up your mind.'

'If he's got one !' sneered his cousin.

'Blowed if I haven't got as big a one as you !' exclaimed the lad ; 'and a better temper into the bargain. I'm sure I pity your people at home——'

But before he could finish his sentence Charteris had turned on him with a face pale with passion.

'Are you going to hold your tongue or not ?' he said.

'I see no reason why I should.'

'Then I shall have to make you.'

'You'd better try !'

Their conversation was so inevitably leading to a quarrel that I thought it time to interfere. I had no clue to the mystery that had raised Mr. Charteris's temper, but I was sorry for Fred Stephenson, who I could see was feeling all a boy's disappointment at the prospect of having his holiday cut short. So I attempted the *rôle* of peacemaker.

'Mr. Charteris, pray don't have any words with your cousin. You are frightening Ange and all of us. And, Fred, you shouldn't speak in that way ; you are spoiling your holiday, and making everybody uncomfortable. Mr. Charteris, won't you take him to the forest ?'

'If he wishes it I will. I have already said so.'

'I am sure he wishes it. He only came over for that purpose ; didn't you, Fred ?'

'I shan't care to go if Charteris speaks to me in that manner,' grumbled the boy.

'I shall not do it if you keep a civil tongue in your head. Will you come out shooting, then, or not?'

'Yes.'

'Very well; I shall be ready in half a minute.'

Charteris turned on his heel as he spoke and left the room, but I detected an uncomfortable look of suspicion on his face as he did so.

This unpleasant episode had made us all feel conscious, and not tended to increase the hilarity of my temperament. Fred stood thoughtfully at the window after his cousin had disappeared, and I drew near to speak a few words of comfort to him.

'I am sorry this has happened, but it will all blow over in the forest. I suppose you will come back to dinner with him.'

'I don't know. If I don't get on his black books again, I may. What makes him so grumpy, Miss Marsh?'

'I have no idea! He seemed annoyed at your mentioning Parkhurst. Is that where his family live?'

'Yes! And you know it's such a shame, he's been away from home now for nearly six months, and of course it's put them out, and my dad says it's all a pretence his being afraid of the scarlet fever. Only two had it, and they were well weeks ago, and poor Mary——'

'That's his sister, isn't it?' I interposed.

But Cave Charteris re-entered the room at that very moment, and Fred did not answer my question. I was sorry for it, for I wanted to learn something about his cousin's family, for Ange's sake. But he was hurried off to the château, and there was no further opportunity to exchange a word with him. He departed with many *au revoirs*, promising himself to meet us again at dinner; but when that meal was served, to our great surprise Mr. Charteris walked in alone.

'Where is your cousin?' we simultaneously asked him.

'My cousin!' he ejaculated, as if he had quite forgotten his existence. 'What! Fred Stephenson! I've sent him back to school by the diligence.'

'Without his dinner?' said Tessie, in a voice of pity.

'Oh! he had an excellent lunch at the Baron's—ate enough for two, I can assure you; and I knew if I brought him back here that he would outstay his leave. Mr. Felton is very particular about the boys being punctual, and Master Fred is *not* particular about anything at all; and so, as I am a sort of guardian of his, responsible to his father for his good behaviour and all that sort of thing, I thought it better to take the law into my own hands and see him safely off before I sat down to dinner.'

It sounded plausible. There was no particular fault to find with the man's anxiety to save his young cousin from getting into a scrape with his master, still, coupling it with the reception he had given the lad that morning, and the haste with which he had hurried him out of the house, I could not help suspecting that Cave Charteris had some other reason beside what he stated for trying to keep Master Fred Stephenson out of the way.

CHAPTER XXVII.

ACCEPTED.

'WHY do you go up to the convent every morning, dear? It is far too long a walk for you.'

I was standing in the little *salle*, holding Ange's hot hand in my own. Six days had elapsed since Master Fred Stephenson had appeared and so mysteriously disappeared from amongst us, and on each one of them Ange had toiled up to the Couvent des Petites Sœurs, which was situated on the brow of a hill, two miles on the road to Artois, and not come back again until it was time for dinner.

I believe that in her feverish and unsettled state of mind, and with her loose notions of theology, she was doing some sort of penance to satisfy her self-accusing conscience, and I so much wished that the dear child would open her mind to Tessie and me instead, and let us give her all the sisterly counsel in our power. But each day she seemed to shrink more and more from us, as well she might, whilst that man was persuading her to stain her fair soul with the blot of deceit.

But there were other reasons for my trying to dissuade Ange from going to the convent. She was very far from well, or fit for the exertion. Whether it proceeded from mind or body, I could not tell, but since the day she had overheard Madame Marmoret's speech to her father, in the courtyard, she had been quite unlike her former joyous, light-hearted self. Her cheeks were always either unnaturally flushed or unnaturally pale, she complained of a dull headache, and all the bounding elasticity I had so much admired seemed to have deserted her limbs. She was very particular about her religious services at this time, poor dear little Ange, spending an hour almost every evening in the church of St. Marie, and poring over her Bible long after Tessie and I had gone to rest.

Still, neither religion nor exercise and fresh air made any palpable difference in the appearance of the little maid, and I felt sure that something was very wrong. My expostulations on the subject with Tessie only brought to light another instance of Mr. Lovett's selfishness. She looked very grave over the details of her sister's symptoms, but was afraid to mention them to her father, because it would seem as though Ange required a doctor, and there was none nearer than Rille.

He visited St. Pucelle once a week, and when he next came she would ask him to prescribe for Ange ; but to send for him especially to visit her was to entail an expense which she was sure 'dear papa' could not afford. The time was past for disguising my sentiments in Tessie's presence, and I told her plainly what I thought on this occasion.

Yet she was too timid to move in the matter. 'Dear papa' had evidently inspired her with so much wholesome dread of provoking his annoyance, that she preferred to shut her eyes to the fact of there being any danger in delay. But all this time I am standing in the inner *salle* with that little hot feverish hand in mine.

'Why must you go to the convent, Ange?'

'There is no particular necessity, Hilda,' she answered, yet she would not meet my eyes as she did so, 'but it is a pleasure to me, and I feel as if I could not breathe in the house this weather. I know all the sisters well, and their parlours are so cool and pleasant. I feel like another creature inside the convent walls.'

'I hope you are not thinking of joining their community, Ange?'

'Oh no—oh no!'—with a vivid blush; 'I am not good enough.'

'I don't know about that, but we certainly can't afford to lose you! However, if you are bent upon going this morning, may I go with you?'

A startled look came into her eyes.

'Into the convent, do you mean?'

'No! not so far as that! Only to walk to the gates with you.'

'Oh! do, Hilda! I shall be very glad of your company. It is a lonely path over the hill.'

So I was mistaken, after all, and had wronged the little maid in thinking that Mr. Charteris must be her cavalier on these occasions.

We walked together through the blazing light over the fern-covered hill, and conversed pleasantly on all the topics that interest young women most. Once I tried to sound her on the subject of Charteris, but she shrunk from it so visibly that I had not the heart to try again. It was as if I had plunged a surgeon's probe into a bleeding wound.

When I had kissed her pretty face for the last time, and left her behind the great iron grille of the convent, I could not help believing that my former supposition was correct, and Ange was brooding over the prospect of shutting herself up for ever within its walls. This idea worried me sadly. It would be like a living death for her!

And what else but the burden of a committed wrong could have made Ange's thoughts turn that way? Could she have discovered more of her father's pecuniary affairs than Tessie and I knew of? and did the knowledge of disgrace and debt weigh her mind down to that extent that she longed to bury herself from the sight of the world? Or did the poor child imagine that the burthen of one less to keep and provide for would be of any substantial benefit to the family purse?

These questions occupied my mind for half the way back again—until I came, indeed, upon a figure in a velveteen shooting-suit, stretched out at full length upon the thyme-scented grass, and lazily inhaling the light breeze that was wafted across the stream in the valley, and just lifted occasionally a curl of dark hair from his brow.

It was that of my French master, Armand, Baron de Nesselrode.

I feel I have reached a point when I must make a confession—namely, that since the memorable day upon which I was frightened by the dog-wolf on the Piron road, I had received more than one French lesson from the gentleman in question. I had never made a single appointment with him for the purpose; but he seemed to be ubiquitous, and to pop up wherever I went, so that although the verbs I mastered with him were *accidentals*, I had acquired quite a remarkable fluency in conversation, and never felt at a loss to express what I meant.

He said I learned quicker than anybody he had known before; but I suppose, if 'practice makes perfect,' there was not so much credit due to me as he would have made me believe. Once I remember I stopped to ask myself if I were studying the French language so diligently *for Tessie's sake*, and I was fain to answer 'No.'

Indeed, I am afraid that by this time Tessie's interests had been withdrawn from the firm altogether. She was very stupid, so I inwardly decided; she would not come forward and make the best of herself in the Baron's presence, and in consequence it was impossible he could discover what a good wife he would gain in her, and so I had given them both up as a bad job.

If people *wouldn't* find out what was best for themselves, it was useless wasting my time upon them. So Tessie's merits had ceased to be dragged in by the head and shoulders, as a topic of conversation between Armand and me, and we only talked of such things as were most agreeable to ourselves.

'Well, monsieur,' I exclaimed, as I came up with him, 'and what may you be doing here?'

'I followed you, mademoiselle.'

'That is a pretty confession! How could you tell I had come this way?'

'I saw Mademoiselle Ange and you leave the curé's house together.'

'And so you have been dogging our footsteps,' I said, as I threw myself down on the grass he had just quitted.

The Baron accepted my action as an invitation to resume his seat.

'It is about time you accounted for yourself,' I continued jestingly. 'I don't think we have seen you for two whole days.

'Is it only two days?' he said, in a melancholy voice. 'It seems like two weeks to me.'

'Why, monsieur, what is the matter with you? Not moping again, I hope! I thought you promised me to be brave and keep your heart up, in hope of better times.'

He sighed deeply.

'That was a week ago,' he answered.

'And what of that? You are talking mysteries to me.'

'Mademoiselle,' said the Baron, suddenly changing the topic, 'do you remember telling me the day we talked together on the road to Piron, that there is no "stooping" in honest labour?'

'I do.'

'I have thought much and earnestly of your words since then. I look back on the years that have passed since my great misfortune, and I see they have all been spent in idleness and waste of mind and body! I cannot recall them: they are gone and done for: they must be left to give their own account hereafter. But for the few that remain before I hope to take my station in society again, I am determined, if possible, not to blush. I have made up my mind, mademoiselle. I am going to work.'

'I am sincerely glad to hear you say so!' I exclaimed.

'If you are glad, it is all I ask. I will try to be glad also.'

'But what are you going to do?'

'I wrote to a friend at Court some weeks ago, telling him all, and asking his assistance to procure me fit employment until I should hold my own again. His answer arrived three days back. In it he offers me the post of *Ministre d'affaires* in—in —Algiers.'

'*Algiers!*'

As I repeated the word after him, all the broad smiling landscape of hill and dale and stream which lay spread out before me seemed to be enveloped in a black mist that hid it from my view A hoarse sound like the rushing of water was in my ears, and a horrid 'whirring' like wheels in my brain; then it all cleared off again. The sun broke out over the valley, my senses had returned; but I thought that the earth would never look the same to me again.

'Do you not congratulate me?' inquired Monsieur de Nesselrode, quietly. 'It is a charming climate, I understand, and the place is peopled with French. The salary is almost nominal, so are the duties; but the position is one that I can accept without blushing, and I shall, at all events, have an arena for work amongst my countrymen, small as it may be.'

'Yes.'

'Does not the appointment meet your views for me? Will it not be better than dragging out four more years of idleness and false shame at the Château des Roses?'

'Oh yes.'

'I am not capable of much at present, you know, whatever I may be hereafter. You—in the goodness of your heart and friendship—may think me fit for a higher post, but I feel I am not. I have crippled my powers by nonusage: I must crawl now before I can fly. Perhaps, after a year or two, I may be fit for something better than the ministration of affairs in such a place as Algiers.'

'I am sure you will.'

I was so angry with myself for not being able to say something better to him than this. I saw he wanted encouragement to take up this paltry appointment in a strange country. He had applied for it solely on my recommendation, and now that it had come, I had no words in which to praise and thank him for the compliment he had paid to my advice.

But Algiers—a place so far removed from all his friends, and replete, as I ignorantly imagined, with dangers from climate and people—I did not expect that my counsel would have taken so unwelcome a form.

'You do not congratulate me, mademoiselle,' he repeated presently. 'Do you not consider the prospect a good one?'

'Oh yes,' I answered nervously; 'very good indeed—that is, it is rather far from here, is it not, monsieur?'

'It is very far,' he said gravely. 'I do not suppose, when I have once left it, that I shall ever see St. Pucelle again; for the remembrances of the old château have no charm for me. A few weeks back, I would have declared myself ready to bear anything sooner than go to Algiers; but things that have come to my knowledge lately have made me think that the greater distance I put between myself and this place the better.'

'Have you any fresh trouble?' I inquired anxiously, for he was my best friend in St. Pucelle, and I had come to be interested in all that befell him.

'Yes, a very deep trouble!'

'What is it, monsieur? Will you not tell me?'

He turned round upon his side, so that his face could look directly into mine.

'If I tell you, will you promise not to be angry with me, nor to feel less my friend than you do now?'

'I promise!'

But there was an expression in his eyes that made me drop my own. I could not look at him.

'Remember, before I speak, how much I wish you well. Hilde!' (he had never called me by that name before), 'if I could give you happiness by cutting off my right arm, I would do it at this moment. So that I am really and honestly glad to know that you are glad. The pain only is mine, *amie* *chérie;* and I can bear that bravely, so long as all is well with you.'

'Monsieur, I do not understand what you mean !'

'When this appointment was first offered me, I thought I could not take it. I thought it would be impossible to leave St. Pucelle and you. But only a few hours afterwards I met Mademoiselle Markham, and she told me all about your *affaire de cœur*, and I was happy it should be so; only I felt I could not stay and see it.'

'What did she tell you?' I asked quickly.

'That you are *fiancée* to Monsieur Sandilands. Ah, you need not blush, Hilde! It is all right if you wish it so. But for me it is better I should go to Algiers, and forget the pleasant times that we have spent together.'

'Armand!' I said vehemently, 'it is a lie! I am not *fiancée* to Mr. Sandilands, nor to anybody.'

How his face changed from quiet melancholy to radiant hope. The dullest eye might have interpreted that look.

'What!' he exclaimed. 'You are free?'

'I *am* free.'

'And you are sorry I am going to Algiers?'

'I *am* sorry!'

I do not know if there ever lived any women in this world (such as some novelists depict for us) who could cast away the whole of their lives' happiness for want of a single word to clear up a misunderstanding—but if so, I am not one of them. Armand de Nesselrode looked me full in the face as he put that question, and I should have been ashamed of myself if I had not answered him truthfully.

'Hilde!' he said passionately, 'will you go with me?'

Then I felt that my woman's victory was won, and I could afford to be silent and let silence speak for me.

'I should not have dared to ask for this,' he went on rapidly, 'had it not been for the sweet encouragement your words have given me. You have told me that you despise wealth in comparison with love; that you rank a true heart and a strong arm above any earthly advantage, and that you think my honour still unstained. Will you take me, then, beloved Hilde, a poor man, disgraced in the eyes of the world, and with nothing to offer the woman he would make his wife, except a true affection and an earnest desire to prove himself worthy of hers? Oh, Hilde! do not keep me in suspense. I have loved you ever since the day you prayed for me in St. Marie!'

I raised my eyes and looked at the dear face lifted so pleadingly to my own, and felt that nothing on this earth could repay me for the loss I should sustain in losing him.

'Armand,' I said tremblingly, 'I must go with you to Algiers—because I don't pronounce French half as well yet as you would wish to hear me do it, you know!'

And then I put my head down in my hands and burst into tears, from sheer excess of happiness.

I shall not write down here how he soothed me. Were I not my own biographer I might be able to tell it, but from the moment Armand said he loved me, our affection had been too sacred a thing for me to make public. In half an hour we were still sitting on that grass, chatting away as if we had been engaged for years, and making all sorts of plans for the future.

I confided to him my money matters and Mr. Lovett's strange dealings with me regarding them, and he told me how much his card transactions with the reverend gentleman had got him into debt, and how he proposed to liquidate it so that we might start free when we were married.

And we mutually agreed not to say a word of what had passed between us that morning, until after Mr. Warrington's visit had been paid to St. Pucelle, and my affairs with my guardian set straight again.

Oh, how charming it was sitting in that lovely sunlight, and talking of the happy days to come! Algiers no longer seemed a horrid desert, situated a thousand leagues away from St. Pucelle. Our love had drawn it closer, and peopled it with pleasant forms and faces, until it looked like fairyland! I had but one regret amidst my pleasure: that my dear mother had not lived to see it! Bear witness for me, best beloved of parents, that you were not forgotten in your lonely grave in Norwood at that most ecstatic moment of my existence, for the tears ran down my cheeks as I recalled your love for me, and I told Armand what he had lost in never knowing it.

'I will be thy mother and thy father and thy everything to thee, *chérie*,' he answered, with the sweet *tu-toy* that sounded like music in my ears; 'only let me wipe away those tears, and see my Baronne smile again!'

It was difficult to remain subject to any melancholy long, whilst under the influence of Armand's new-born happiness. His face positively beamed with joy. I had never caught even a glimpse of such an expression on his countenance before.

'I let thee go, my Hilde!' he said, when I had persuaded him that after four hours' absence from the house I ran the risk of being questioned as to how I had spent my time, 'but I shall count the moments till we meet again.'

'But thou wilt never feel lonely now, Armand,' I replied.

'Thou wilt look forward to the future we shall spend hand-in-hand.'

'I shall look forward to the time, my friend, when the angel who watches over me shall fold her wings upon my heart,' he answered.

It is very nice to be called an angel! I almost believed I was one by the time we got back to the house. But we had to walk with the utmost propriety through the town—at least three feet apart—and to bow to each other most politely as we parted at the door.

'Art thou sure thou art not *fiancée* to Monsieur Sandilands?' whispered Armand, as he doffed his hat to me, and the look of perfect happiness upon his face as he said so, gave me the strangest joy my life had ever known.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE DEATH-BLOW.

I HAD been hugging this dear delicious secret to my breast for the last three days; going apart at intervals to gaze upon it and assure myself that it was mine; and quite unable to believe in so much joy after the hopeless desolation of the last few months, when that happened which anyone with discernment must have foreseen long ago: *petite* Ange succumbed to the illness which had been hanging over her for weeks past.

It was one morning when she had left the room as usual, *en* *route* to her convent, and Mr. Lovett had set off on a round of what he called his parochial duties, that Tessie and I were startled by the sound of a loud clamour and confusion arising from the courtyard.

'Good gracious!' I exclaimed, as it struck my ears; 'what on earth is that?'

Tessie, who had turned as white as a sheet, would have detained me in the little *salle;* but I broke from her grasp, and rushing into the kitchen, looked through the open window. There I saw assembled in the court a group of about a dozen men and women, amongst whom I immediately distinguished the figures of Madame Marmoret, the Mère Fromard, and Jean Marat, who were all surrounding my reverend guardian and preventing his egress from his own domains. They had evidently waited to waylay him on his leaving the house, and were screeching or howling, according to their various sexes, as they made their fierce demands upon him for justice.

Mutiny was strongly marked on every countenance, and they pressed upon the old man as though they would lay violent hands upon him. Of course I guessed the reason of the uproar. It was the old story; they wanted their money, and he had none to give them! I glanced from the crowd towards my guardian, and for the first time I pitied him. He looked so pale and crestfallen as he leaned against the courtyard wall, fencing off his creditors with the stick on which he supported himself. It was a sickening and humiliating spectacle, and I thanked Heaven in that moment that no blood of his ran in my veins.

'Where are the twelve francs you owe me, monsieur?' shouted Marat the cobbler. 'I tell you I must have them. My wife is ill in bed, and requires broth and white bread to get up her strength again. Do you think I am going to let her want for lack of that which is my own? Hand them out, I say, for I will have them.'

'Bah!' cried the scornful voice of Mère Fromard. 'What is thy wife's illness to him? Didn't he steal my poor Guillaume's money, and the little *dot* I brought him on our marriage day? Five hundred and fifty francs, messieurs—every *sou* owed us by that black-hearted old villain! and he let my husband die for want of bread and meat. I wish I could tear him in pieces, and it would be too good an end for him. *Sacré!*'

'And much good you'd get out of his carcase, Mère Fromard!' interposed Madame Marmoret; 'better wait, I tell you, till it's all over, and then the law must give us our rights!'

'Madame! Madame!' said her master, in a mildly reproachful voice, 'is it you that can say no better of me than that! You, who have lived under my roof and eaten my bread for more than twenty years!'

'Lived under your roof—pig! Aye! that I have, and done you good service for it too! Haven't I baked and boiled and mended and cleaned for you and yours for twenty-two years last Candlemas! And what wages have I received in return? None! Not a *sou*—not a *centime!* I have gone on and on, because I knew if I left you I should get nothing, and you have promised and promised till I'm sick of the sound of your voice or the sight of your face. I should have summoned you before the *préfet* and had my rights years ago if it hadn't been for *la petite* Ange, and you know it—*vaurien* as you are—and have held the child as a threat over my head in consequence.'

'Down with him!' shouted half a dozen voices; 'down with the man who uses his own child as an instrument wherewith to scourge the poor, whom she is so good to! Don't show him any pity! He has never shown any for our wives or children!'

They pressed so closely upon him, and their faces were so distorted by passion, that I became horribly alarmed for his safety. Had Mr. Charteris been in the house, I should have summoned him at once to my assistance, but he had gone out shooting with Armand, and was miles and miles away. Mr. Lovett's face was as pale and set as marble, but he continued in the same position and evinced no outward signs of fear.

'Cannot you speak a little lower, my friends?' he expostulated, in a firm voice. 'I suppose you do not wish the whole town to hear your complaints?'

'What do we care who hears us?' replied the man in the blouse and the peaked cap, whose name was Dubois; 'all St. Pucelle knows you to be a robber! The wider the truth is spread the better!'

'I know I owe you all some money,' said Mr. Lovett, 'and when I can pay you, I will. At present it is impossible, and you will get no good by keeping me a prisoner in my own yard. You had much better disperse quietly, and leave me in peace to see what arrangements I can make to satisfy you.'

'Aye—aye!' responded Dubois, 'leave you to go out and order in more champagne and burgundy, and truffled turkeys and smoked hams, for your own table, whilst we go home to feast on rye-bread and water. That's what you've been doing for the last twenty years. Eating your head off on honest people's credit, and giving them buttered words instead of cash. But you've come to the end of your tether at last.'

'*Ahi! Ahi! Ahi!*' yelled the rest, as they brandished their bare arms and made grimaces at him.

'Truffled turkeys and champagne!' screamed the Mère Fromard; 'I'll give him a truffled turkey to remember me by!' and seizing a huge wooden *sabot* from her foot, she prepared to hurl it at his head.

In a moment I had dashed through the kitchen-door, and was standing in front of the old man. My sudden and unexpected appearance created somewhat of a diversion.

'How dare you attempt violence!' I cried excitedly: 'put down that *sabot*, Mère Fromard, or I will send at once for the *gendarme*. You are fools, every one of you, to risk a prison for the sake of indulging your venomous tongues.'

'Mamselle does not understand,' commenced the cobbler, with a view to explanation.

'I understand everything, Jean Marat, and I see that you are a set of cowardly ruffians instead of respectable tradespeople as I took you to be. Twelve to one! That is a brave proceeding, isn't it? Why, if you hadn't watched Monsieur Charteris out of the house, you wouldn't have dared to enter the yard.'

'We want our money, mamselle,' squeaked a woman's voice.

'Well, you shan't have it! not until you have apologised to Monsieur le Curé for the indignities you have put upon him, and gone quietly away to your own homes. If you will do that, I promise you your bills shall be paid.'

'Aye! but have you any right to promise?' grumbled one of the men.

'I have money of my own, and I will pay them myself. Will that satisfy you?'

'You may trust the word of mamselle,' said Madame Fromard, addressing the crowd. 'I know a true face when I see it, and she has been very good to me since Guillaume died.'

'And nicely you have requited my kindness, Madame Fromard,' I retorted. 'You, who call yourself a Christian, to attempt to injure an old man like this, and a minister of religion. Are you not afraid of bringing down the anger of Heaven upon your family? What would Monsieur l'Abbé say to such a disgraceful proceeding?'

'Monsieur l'Abbé owes no man anything,' grumbled the woman.

'And because he is good, is that any reason you should be bad? I'm ashamed of the whole lot of you. Come now! clear out of this courtyard at once. If there is a single man or woman left here in two minutes' time, I shall send for the *gendarme* to restore order. And you, Marmoret, go back to your kitchen and remain there!'

I suppose my determined voice and manner had some effect in making them obey me, for they certainly disappeared with marvellous alacrity. But I was terribly frightened the while, and when the last one had filed out of the yard, I was trembling all over from excitement.

'Mr. Lovett,' I said quickly, as I turned to my guardian; 'pray come back into the house. I am sure you must want a glass of wine after such an unpleasant scene.'

The old man looked just the same as he had done before: very pale and fixed, but unmoved; and I could not help admiring his British determination not to show the white feather. Yet, when he answered me, I saw that his lip trembled, and I could hardly understand what he said.

'Thank you, my dear Hilda,' were his first words; and then I think he added, in a lower tone, 'I have not deserved this at your hands,' We passed through the kitchen arm-in-arm, and I threw a defiant glance at Madame Marmoret, in exchange for the scowl with which she honoured me, and led my guardian to the little *salle*, where Tessie, who had nearly frightened herself into a fit, was waiting to receive us.

'Oh, papa! dear papa! she exclaimed, as she flung herself into her father's arms and burst into tears. 'What *shall* we do? Are those horrid people gone? Is there nothing we can say to keep them quiet?'

But Mr. Lovett had quite recovered himself by this time, and was ready to rebuke his daughter for her folly in making a mountain out of a mole-hill.

'Calm yourself, my dear Tessie,' he said, as he patted her on the back; 'there is nothing to be so agitated about. These poor souls are certainly very ignorant of etiquette, and we must make allowances for them, although they must be taught that they cannot take the law in their own hands. They appear to have a little misunderstanding amongst them, and to fancy I do not intend to pay them their money. I must set this straight at once, and for that purpose I think it will be better if I go to Rille for a few days and consult my man of business, Monsieur Richet. Let me see, to-day is Tuesday, and I shall be back, at the latest, on Friday. Will you put a couple of shirts into my small black bag, my dear, and anything else you may think necessary, whilst our dear Hilda pours me out a glass of burgundy, for I really require something after all that talking.'

I had not been his 'dear Hilda' for many a long day, but I was in no frame of mind to resent the liberty then. My reverend guardian's coolness took me completely aback. Did he think that Tessie and I were to be gulled by his proposals to see his man of business, or had he talked in that pompous manner so long that he had outgrown the perception of its absurdity? At any rate, however, I was thankful he was going to Rille. To get him out of the way for the present was the chief thing, and whilst there, we might come to some conclusion as to the best way to patch up his affairs, which were so evident a scandal in the parish.

'Let us walk with your father to the diligence, Tessie,' I suggested, as she reappeared with his travelling-bag, for I felt quite afraid lest something might happen in the middle of the town if he were allowed to go by himself.

Everyone was agreeable to this arrangement, so we accompanied him as far as the Hôtel d'Etoile, and saw him safely seated in the coach and started on the road to Artois. And then we returned home again, I exhorting Tessie all the way to try and control her feelings, and keep her own counsel with respect to the morning's alarm, lest some report of it should reach the ears of Ange.

When we arrived at the house we ran upstairs together to make the beds, a domestic duty which we had taken upon ourselves and should have accomplished directly after breakfast had it not been for the unfortunate interruption to which we had been subjected. The first room we entered was that occupied by Ange and Tessie. The first thing I saw on entering it was a black heap upon the floor.

'Hullo!' I exclaimed, thinking it was a fallen dress, and about to reprimand the Miss Lovetts for their untidiness; but the next moment my voice had changed to a shrill alarm. 'Tessie, Tessie! look here—for God's sake! *it is Ange!*'

We rushed up to the figure on the floor and knelt beside it.

I raised the head and laid it gently back upon my arm. The girl was in a state of complete unconsciousness.

'She has fainted!' cried Tessie. 'Oh, my poor darling, how ill she looks! And how did she come here? I thought she had gone to the convent.'

'So did I! She certainly said good-bye to us as she left the *salle.* Can she have felt ill and returned whilst we were absent?'

'But then Marmoret would have seen her, Hilda. The door of the corridor is locked; I have the key in my pocket.'

'Well, we mustn't stay to speculate how it happened. Put a pillow under her head, Tessie. We must lay her flat down on the ground and loosen her clothes. Oh! how I wish you had sent for Dr. Perrin when I asked you.'

'How could I tell she was so ill?' asked Tessie, weeping.

'Anyone could have told it! She has been ill and feverish for weeks past, and I am not sure if her mind or body is suffering the most. What a pity we didn't find her before your father left the house! He might have sent Monsieur Perrin back from Rille at once.'

'We must write and tell him by this afternoon's post, Hilda. Oh! why doesn't she open her eyes? What shall we do?'

'Set the door and window wide open, and run down and fetch some spring water to sprinkle her face with. Don't cry so, Tessie; it can do no good, and will distress her when she is coming to herself again.'

Tessie flew downstairs to do my bidding, and returned in company with Madame Marmoret, to whom she had confided her sister's condition. To see that woman as she bent over the insensible form of her nursling, with all the rancour faded out of her black eyes, and her hard-lined, brown face twitching with emotion, one would never have believed she was the same creature who had urged on her master's creditors to take their vengeance with the malignity of a she-devil.

'*Eh! bah! ma petite Ange!*' she exclaimed, in a tone of anguish, as she kissed the unconscious face. 'What art thou dreaming of? It is not time to go to heaven yet, *bébé*, though thou art fitter for that than for such an earth as ours. What can have brought thee to such a state, *enfant chérie? Ay mi, ay mi!*'

'It is my belief you have only yourself to thank for it, Madame,' I said curtly, as I unceremoniously thrust her to one side.

'Does mamselle wish to insult me?' she demanded.

'I wish to tell you the truth. I believe that Mademoiselle Ange never went to the convent at all this morning, but came up to her room instead, and then overheard the disgraceful tumult you permitted in the courtyard. You may fancy how that would affect her, when she has been kept in ignorance even of her father's debts.'

'*Mon Dieu!*' cried Madame, aghast. 'You do not mean to tell me the child was *here* the while?'

'I feel sure she was. She could not have left the house and returned to it without our notice. We forgot all about her in our excitement, while she stood here and received a sword in her tender little heart. Poor Ange!'

'Oh, my *bébé*, my *bébé!*' said Madame, with the tears running down her cheeks; 'it is not true—it cannot be true! For nineteen years have I borne it patiently for her sake, and would have bitten my tongue out sooner than have told her what I suffered. And now, through my own wickedness, in an evil moment, she has heard all !'

'Hush !' I exclaimed authoritatively. 'She is coming to herself. Don't make her worse by the sight of your agitation.'

As I spoke the words, Ange slowly unclosed her violet eyes—dimmed violets they looked now, as if a cloudy mist had spread over them—and turned them inquiringly upon me.

'It is all right, darling,' I said cheerfully, to reassure her. 'You have been a stupid girl and fainted, but now that you have revived again, we will lift you on the bed, and let you lie still and rest.'

We all three raised her as I concluded, and helped to lay her on her bed, but the only sign of consciousness she gave was the visible shudder with which she greeted Madame Marmoret's touch.

The woman stooped down and kissed her hand, but I saw Ange draw it away—very feebly it is true, but sufficiently to mark her dislike of the action—and then I knew that I had guessed aright, and she had been witness to the indignities heaped upon her father.

'Hilda,' said Tessie to me that afternoon, in a frightened whisper, 'we *must* write for Dr. Perrin.'

I quite agreed with her ; for though four hours had gone by since we had laid Ange upon her bed, she had not spoken a single word to either of us ; and, except that her eyes were open, and she occasionally heaved a deep sigh, she appeared almost as unconscious as when we found her on the floor.

We had not left her for a moment since that time, but had been unable to persuade her either to speak or swallow nourishment ; and I, for one, was becoming seriously alarmed.

'We must not only send for the doctor, but your father must come home again, Tessie,' I answered, 'for I am afraid that Ange is going to be very ill. If you will write the letter at once, I will run down with it to the post before the afternoon diligence starts for Artois.'

'What a pity Mr. Charteris is away to-day. He might have been so useful to us,' sighed Tessie.

'Oh! we can do very well without *him*,' I responded impatiently.

I don't know how it was, but at that moment I hated the thought of Cave Charteris in connection with our little Ange more than I had ever done before.

Some people might imagine that in an emergency Madame Marmoret, being our servant, might have taken a letter to the post for us; but such people could never know what Madame Marmoret was like.

She was far too fine and mighty to run menial errands, and this was certainly not the day on which I should have asked her to do so.

So, without taking any notice of her as she sat in the kitchen, dropping tears into the *potage* she was preparing for our dinner, I ran through the house into the street, and made my way to the post-office with Tessie's letter.

It was quite at the bottom of the town, and as I reascended the steep hill I came in collision with Mrs. Carolus, evidently bristling with some news of importance.

'My dear Miss Marsh, how fortunate I am to meet you! I have just called at your house, but, hearing you were out, I refused to enter, though Sophy insisted upon going in to see Miss Lovett.'

'I am afraid she will hardly find it worth her while, for Tessie could not stay to talk to her. We are in great distress at home to-day, Mrs. Carolus. Ange has been suddenly taken very ill, and I have just posted a letter for the doctor.'

'Oh! indeed! I am most distressed to hear it. There seems nothing but misfortune in St. Pucelle to-day. Sophy has been nearly out of her mind all the morning, and, to tell truth, I was glad of any excuse to be rid of her company for a little while, for she quite drives me distracted by the way in which she goes on.'

'Miss Markham has had no bad news, I hope.'

'Well, my dear, it *ought* not to have been bad news to her, for of what moment can the doings of a young man like Mr. Charteris be to a woman of the age of Sophy Markham? But you know how ridiculous she makes herself, and the absurd notions she gets into her head, and I suppose she was really persuaded that the man liked her and so forth, and now she says that he has blighted her whole life, and she can never be happy again.'

'But *why*, Mrs. Carolus? You have not yet told me the reason.'

'Oh! I suppose you have known it all along, as Mr. Charteris has been living with the Lovetts, but poor Sophy never heard till yesterday, when she was in Rille and met young Frederick Stephenson, that his cousin was a married man.'

'Mr. Charteris *married!*' I exclaimed. 'Oh no! she must be mistaken. It is *impossible.* It cannot be the case.'

'What! *You* had not heard it either, then?' inquired Mrs. Carolus, curiously. 'This beats everything! But you may rely on the truth of my assertion. Young Mr. Stephenson told Sophy who his wife had been—a Miss Mary Ferrier, a great heiress, and they have a beautiful place called Parkhurst in Devonshire, and two children, and they've all had the scarlet fever, and that is the reason that Mr. Charteris was afraid to go home. Shabby of him, *I* call it, to desert his family in an extremity like that; but men are all selfish, my dear. Yet why he should have considered it necessary to come amongst us as a bachelor, puzzles me altogether.'

'*Married!*' I repeated, as various recollections tending to confirm Mrs. Carolus's statement floated in upon my mind, and then, a sudden fear seizing me, I exclaimed: 'Oh! I hope Miss Markham has not gone into the Lovetts' especially to tell them this!'

'I can't say, Miss Marsh, but she is very full of it, and you know what Sophy is over a piece of news. But where are you going?'

'Home—home!' I cried, as I commenced to run up the hill. 'Don't try to detain me. I must get home if I can, and prevent this story reaching Ange's ears.'

I have no doubt I left Mrs. Carolus in a state of the utmost perplexity and bewilderment, but I had no time for explanation. All my desire was to reach Tessie's side before she had communicated Miss Markham's news to her sister. As I raced towards the house, I met Sophy tripping downwards, but I would not stop even to inquire how much mischief she had done. I gained the door, panting and breathless, and came upon Tessie in the *salle*, still more tearful and alarmed than she had been before.

'Oh, Hilda! I am afraid that Ange is worse.'

'How? why? Who has been here?'

'Only Sophy Markham, and she didn't stay a minute. And she told us the most wonderful news——'

'Never mind the news! Where did you see her?'

'She came up to Ange's bedroom! I couldn't leave her, you know.'

'And she told her wonderful news by that child's bedside, and Ange heard every word of it! Oh! Tessie—Tessie! you have killed your sister!'

CHAPTER XXIX.

BROKEN.

It was a hard thing to say to Tessie, who knew nothing of Ange's love for Charteris, but it was wrung from me in the extremity of my fear and pity for the child.

Tessie naturally demanded an explanation of my words, and then and there I made a clean breast of it, telling her what I had seen and heard, and how I had told her father of my discovery, and the unsatisfactory result of my communication.

We flew into each other's arms when the recital was finished, and wept together over the misery of it all, as it behoved us, like true friends and sisters, to do.

'And now, Tessie!' I said, as I wiped my streaming eyes, 'hide nothing from me. Let me know how much she heard and how she heard it, that we may be able to judge what is best to do to avert the consequences from her.'

'I never left her side for a minute,' sobbed Tessie, 'but Sophy

Markham pushed her way into the bedroom, and I could not turn her out. Ange was lying just as you left her, quite still and quiet, with her eyes fixed upon the ceiling. I whispered her condition to Miss Markham, and cautioned her to speak in a low voice, and I believe she did so. She was full of the news of Mr. Charteris turning out to be a married man, and of the shock it was to her; and how he had spent all his evenings lately in the billiard-room of the Hôtel d'Etoile, and everybody had remarked upon his pronounced attentions to herself. She was talking a great deal of nonsense about wishing she had a brother to bring him to book for his scandalous behaviour to her, though I don't believe a word of all that, you know, Hilda.'

'I should think not, my dear! Cave Charteris may be a villain, but he is not a fool. But go on. What did Ange say to it all?'

'She never said a word; but as Miss Markham was running on at this rate, I thought I heard a rustle on the bed, and, turning round, I saw Ange sitting bolt upright with her eyes fixed upon us. Oh, Hilda! her face looked dreadful! You would never have forgotten it. It seemed as if her cheeks and her jaws had suddenly fallen in. I rushed to her side and laid her down again, and she never uttered a syllable, but only stared at me with those melancholy wide-open eyes. I hurried Miss Markham out of the room, although I knew nothing of what you have now told me, and had no idea that Ange's appearance was due to anything she had said. Oh! do you really think it will hurt her?'

'How is she now, Tessie?'

'I think she must be asleep, but I cannot tell. She began to moan so, that I got frightened, and ran down here to watch for your return.'

'Let us go to her at once; and mind, not a word, even to one another, of this wretched business. We must hope that Ange did not hear or understand it, or that, if she did, she may forget it again. It is most important to keep the news from her till she is stronger. I am afraid that, at the best, it will prove a terrible blow to her.'

We hastened back to the bed-chamber, but there was no apparent change in our patient. She still lay on her side, staring into vacancy and occasionally moaning in a low tone to herself. I felt her head and hands; they were burning hot, and her lips had become dry and cracked. There was no doubt of it—Ange was in a raging fever, and every hour we became more alarmed.

'What a mistake it is to live such a distance from a doctor!' I exclaimed impatiently, as the evening drew on. 'I wish I had gone into Artois myself by the diligence this afternoon, or sent Charlie Sandilands, and got Monsieur Perrin to ride over to-night. Is there no help nearer at hand, Tessie? Cannot the *petites sœurs* administer medicines on an emergency?'

'I never heard of their doing so, Hilda. Monsieur Perrin is their hospital surgeon. If it were not for the convent, I don't think we should get him in St. Pucelle at all.'

'Just listen to her moans!' I said in despair. 'Do ask Madame Marmoret to bring up another pitcher of spring water, Tessie. We must keep wet bandages round her head continually. I know of nothing better to do.'

With dinner-time came home Cave Charteris from shooting, and hearing the state of affairs upstairs from Madame Marmoret, he asked to speak to me. One may fancy the blazing eyes with which I went to meet him.

'What do you want?' I demanded brusquely, as I entered the little *salle*.

'Only to hear how much of this sad account that Madame has given me is true. Is it really the case that Mr. Lovett has gone to Rille, and Ange is so ill she can see nobody?'

'Certainly, she can see nobody. She is in a strong fever, and confined to her bed. Have you anything more to say?'

'Yes! That I am not aware what I have done that you should speak to me in such an uncourteous manner!'

'Are you not? Then you must have a tougher conscience than even I gave you credit for.'

'What do you mean, Miss Marsh?' he inquired. 'You appear to resent my taking an ordinary interest in Miss Lovett's health. If you knew all, you would see that——'

'I *do* know all!' I interrupted him sternly, 'and a great deal more than you have any idea of. I know that you are a married man, and that you had much better be at home with your wife and children than affecting this interest in a girl who can never be anything to you *again*.'

I put in *again*, that he might see we had already guessed something of his philandering with poor Ange.

'Has *she* heard of this?' he asked me quickly, with the colour flaming in his face.

'What is that to you?' I replied angrily; 'if you are an honest man, why should you be ashamed to tell the world that you are a married one? I refuse to inform you if Ange has heard the truth or not, but you may rest assured that she will not hear it from you. Her father will be home to-morrow, and the first thing I shall do will be to caution him to protect the interests of his daughter !'

Something very like an oath passed Mr. Charteris's lips at this juncture, but he was at my mercy.

'You are shooting very wide of the mark,' he replied, with an attempt at nonchalance, 'and, forgive me for adding, talking of what you know nothing. I am not in the habit of confiding the details of my domestic life to everybody I meet in this world, but had the fact of my marriage been likely to affect Mr. Lovett or his daughters, I should certainly have announced it. Since you refuse to gratify my curiosity any further, may I ask to see Miss Lovett ?'

'She will not consent to see you,' I replied, 'for she is as well aware as I am of the way in which you have treated her sister.'

'Under these circumstances, I presume that I had better relieve you both of my presence until Mr. Lovett's return.'

'You can do as you choose about that,' I said, as I left him standing there and took my way upstairs again.

In another minute he had passed into the street and was on his road, as I concluded, to the Hôtel d'Etoile, where he had been in the habit of spending his evenings since Armand had given up playing cards ; and Madame Marmoret informed me that he did not return to the house that night.

It was a sad and anxious vigil that we spent beside the bedside of poor Ange, who, towards the small hours, began to toss her arms and head about and mutter rapid incoherent words of which we could not catch the import.

As morning dawned, she lay more quiet, but the cruel fever still raged on, and she was very, very weak.

'How soon can the doctor arrive, Tessie ?' I inquired, as we met over a melancholy breakfast at a side-table in the kitchen. 'When does the diligence come in?'

'At eleven o'clock, Hilda. It is the only one, you know, so they are both sure to be with us by that time. What a comfort it will be to have papa at home once more!'

We sat together, anxiously waiting the advent of the diligence, and scarcely daring to make a surmise as to the probable issue of the doctor's verdict on our poor little sister's case.

Eleven o'clock struck! Half-past eleven, and then there was a sound of feet in the *salle* below. I did not stop to let Madame Marmoret announce any names, but flew past her on the stairs and into the room. Neither Monsieur Perrin nor Mr. Lovett awaited me there. The new arrival was Mr. Warrington. In my astonishment at seeing him, I forgot for a moment the absence of the others.

'Why! Mr. Warrington! you are the last person in the world I expected to see.'

'And yet I sent Miss Hilda notice of my intended visit,' he answered, shaking hands with me.

'True! but not of the probable time. However, I am very glad you are come. If I needed your advice when I wrote to you, I want it tenfold more now. I am in a sad tangle and perplexity, Mr. Warrington.'

'Sorry to hear that! I must have a long talk with your trustee about your financial concerns. I have come over for no other purpose. Do you wish your money to remain invested as it is at present?'

'No, I think not. The fact is, Mr. Warrington, I—I—(I have not told the Lovetts yet, as it is no concern of theirs) but —I am engaged to be married.'

'Hallo! That is sharp work, Miss Hilda. Not to a foreigner, I hope!'

'Now, Mr. Warrington, I thought you would be above such vulgar prejudice. He *is* a foreigner—Baron Armand de Nesselrode—but he is better than all the Englishmen put together.'

'Oh! that of course. And do you intend to settle your income upon this gentleman, then?'

'I have not decided that yet; but I do want to have it transferred to my own keeping. And oh! Mr. Warrington, you will have to pay a few debts of Mr. Lovett's out of it too, because I promised the poor people I would be responsible for their money.'

At this announcement the solicitor looked grave.

'We must speak further on that subject, Miss Hilda. I can do nothing in a hurry. Where is Mr. Lovett, and how soon shall I be able to see him?'

Then I remembered that my guardian ought to have arrived with the doctor from Rille by the same conveyance as Mr. Warrington had travelled in.

'Why, he was at Rille, and didn't he come with you in the diligence?' I exclaimed hastily. 'An old man with white hair and very blue eyes, and accompanied by a foreign doctor?'

'No; there were no gentry at all in the diligence. Only a few peasants and a sister of mercy.'

'What can have delayed them?' I said, in distress. 'We are in great trouble here to-day, Mr. Warrington. The youngest Miss Lovett was taken ill yesterday, and we have no medical assistance nearer than Rille. I wrote to her father by last night's post, begging him to return this morning and bring a doctor with him, and I cannot imagine what should have prevented their arrival. What shall we do?'

'Is the case serious, then?'

'I fear it is—very serious!'

'Can I do nothing to help you, Miss Hilda?'

'Nothing, thank you, Mr. Warrington! We can but watch her and wait. Are you staying at the Etoile?'

'No, at the Cloche. The other looked too noisy for me. I will say good-bye now, then, as you are busy, and you must let me know as soon as Mr. Lovett returns.'

'I will—good-bye!'

I was so glad to see the last of the dear little man, who looked as dapper as if he had travelled up from London in a sealed envelope, for my mind was too much occupied to attend to him. As soon as ever his back was turned, I flew to Tessie to speculate on what unforeseen accident could possibly have occurred to prevent her father joining us.

But speculation was of no use. We were utterly helpless. Wringing our hands would not abate one breath of the dreadful fever that was burning in Ange's veins. All we could do was to pray to God.

Madame Marmoret had spread the news through St. Pucelle, and many a poor peasant woman came up that afternoon and pleaded for admission, only just to look upon the face of *petite* Ange. But I would let no one pass the threshold of her door, for her delirium was now at its height, and she talked continually.

Tessie, who had no stamina, looked worn out with one night's watching; and I persuaded her to go to my room and sleep, whilst I sat with her sister. It was a melancholy task to listen to the poor child's ravings, and I had to call up all my dearest thoughts of Armand, and to try and look steadily forward to the future that was opening for me, in order to keep my courage up to the sticking-point.

'I do not believe it,' Ange muttered rapidly—'I do not believe it. I cannot believe it! He is *not* married. Well, then, I will ask him myself. Where is he? At the Hôtel d'Etoile. I will go at once and ask him. It is but a step. What do my bare feet signify! I do not feel the stones. I only want to ask Cave if he is married. Yes, yes, I will go at once!' and in a moment she was half out of bed, with her fevered feet upon the floor.

'Dear, *dear* Ange!' I expostulated with her. 'Get into bed again! Where would you go to, my darling? You are not dressed. You cannot leave the room. You must lie down like a good child and go to sleep.'

She stared at me as if I had been a stranger.

'Who is it? Why would you keep me? I do not mind the cold. I must go to the Hôtel d'Etoile. Sophy says he is there every evening, and perhaps he is waiting for me. He used to be angry sometimes because I did not go to meet him; but I was afraid papa would hear of it. And papa is so good! Oh, he is so good! so good! He is like a bright saint from heaven. Do you believe he would do anybody a wrong? If people tell lies, that is not his fault. He has a glory round his head. Now it is a rainbow bridge, stretching right into heaven! Let me climb up it—up—up—up—till we go through the shining gates together! But there is such a pain in my head! It dazzles me to look at them.'

Lie down, my darling Ange! and let me bathe your poor head with this cold water.'

'Oh, sister Celeste, is it you? I have not finished the priest's vestment yet, *ma sœur.* There are so many stitches in it, and the gold thread sparkles so, it makes my head ache. But I shall finish it soon! very, very soon! and then dear papa shall pay Cave the hundred and twenty-five francs he owes him. They will give me all that, will they not, *ma sœur*—and perhaps more? Yes, yes; I know—you said so; and then Cave shall have one hundred and twenty-five francs—one hundred and twenty-five francs—one hundred and twenty-five francs! Oh, don't ask me to count them over any more! They shine so, they make my head ache!'

So this was the secret of the little maid's daily visits to the convent. She had been assisting the nuns in the embroidery orders they executed for the church, with the intention of paying back to Cave Charteris the money her father had borrowed from him.

Sweet, tender, self-denying little heart! Had it broken in the effort to sacrifice itself?

'Oh, Cave!' she screamed suddenly, as the fever made a fiercer grasp upon her brain, 'tell me you are *not* married! You cannot be! It is impossible, because you love me so! And you are going to tell papa! You have promised me that you will tell papa directly you receive that letter from England. Why can't you tell him now? Is he busy? Who are those people in the yard? How fierce and strange their faces look! Do they want to kill him? Oh, Cave, save my father! save my poor father! Look at all the wolves round him! Save him from the wolves!'

She was becoming so terribly excited, that I was obliged to hold her down in her bed by main force.

'Down, down!' I heard her mutter. 'Look at the gold pressing me down—till I sink into the earth! Napoleons—bright yellow Napoleons! How nice and cool they feel! but they are very heavy—much too heavy for me! I am not very old, you see. I was eighteen on the day I had those silver earrings you like so much—and you are thirty! How can you love me when I am so much younger than yourself? Yet you do, don't you? You have sworn it so many times! Oh yes, yes; I understand. You needn't be afraid. I shan't tell Hilda!

The fever was running so high, and the dear child was becoming so violent, that I felt desperate. What could I do to quiet her? I had a bottle of laudanum in my room that I kept in the event of toothache, and I poured twenty or thirty drops of it in a little water, and gave it her to drink.

Rightly or wrongly done, it had the effect of making her doze off for an hour, during which time I sat with bated breath and folded hands, lest I should disturb the charm.

At seven o'clock Tessie crawled into the room again, looking like a washed-out rag. She seemed as if she wanted almost as much care as her sister, although I do not believe she at all realised the danger Ange was in.

'Oh, I am so weary!' were the first words she said to me.

'I see you are. Well, look here, Tessie: I am going downstairs now to make you a good strong cup of coffee, and then I shall lie down till twelve o'clock, when you must come and call me again.'

Oh, that won't be fair, Hilda! You sat up all last night.'

'Never mind! I am stronger than you are, and a few hours rest will make me quite fresh. Ange is sleeping quietly now, and I hope she may continue to do so. But, at any rate, you are to wake me at twelve.'

Notwithstanding my boasted strength, however, I was very glad to close my eyes in sleep; for to hold a night's vigil is very trying when one is unaccustomed to it. But I have always possessed the ability to wake myself at any given hour. I lay down that evening, expecting to be roused at midnight: and at midnight I roused myself, without giving anyone the trouble to call me. I waked in the darkness, struck a match, and perceived the hands of my little clock stood at fifteen minutes past the hour.

'Just like Tessie!' I thought. 'She thinks to cheat me into snoring till six o'clock in the morning. But I am one too many for her!'

I lit my candle, slipped on the shoes which were the only articles of dress I had disencumbered myself of, and stole noiselessly across the corridor into the sisters' room.

How quietly Ange must be sleeping! There was not a sound but her breathing to be heard. Surely she must be better! The room was wrapt in gloom; it was foolish of Tessie not to have procured a lamp. I threw the light of my taper across the bed. The first thing I perceived was the form of Tessie, seated on the ground, with her head against the counterpane, and fast asleep.

The words of Scripture flashed across my mind, 'Could ye not watch one hour?' But I excused her.

'Poor girl,' I thought, 'she is really weak! It is a physical impossibility for her to keep awake.'

The next moment I had thrown my light *upon* the bed to see how Ange fared.

Merciful heavens! *Where was she?* I rushed up to the couch and pulled down the clothes impetuously. It was empty—void!

I glanced round the room: it was in the same condition. *Ange was gone!*

'Tessie, Tessie!' I exclaimed loudly, as I shook that young lady into consciousness again. 'Where is your sister? Where is Ange?'

She waked with a start of bewilderment, and became as horrified as myself.

'But she was *here*—she was *here!*' she kept on repeating. 'I only went to sleep for a minute, indeed, Hilda! I left her sleeping safely here.'

'I believe it; but while you slept she has escaped. We must search every corner of the house at once. Come with me! there is not a moment to lose!'

We rushed from room to room without success. Ange was apparently nowhere on the premises. I clasped my hands upon my forehead to try and decide what to do next. Escaped! and in the middle of the night? Where could she have gone? Where could she *wish* to go? I had it! Like an inspiration the answer came to me: 'To the Hôtel d'Etoile!'

'Tessie!' I cried, 'you must stay here, in case Ange returns. Go and wake Madame Marmoret to keep you company. And I will go and search for her in the town.'

'*In the town!* Oh, Hilda, how could she be in the town? It is impossible!'

'Find her in the house then!' I exclaimed, as I ran out of the front door, which was never fastened, night nor day, and flew down the steep stony street, in the direction of the Hôtel d'Etoile, as fast as my feet could carry me.

It was the principal hotel in the place, and boasted of a billiard-room, which was on the ground-floor and fronted the street. The young men in St. Pucelle made this billiard-room their nightly rendezvous : and it was here that Sophy Markham had averred that Charteris spent all his evenings.

Long before I reached it I could see the stream of light which its lamps threw across the road, and hear the sound of men's voices, laughing and talking together, and the click of the billiard-balls canoning each other on the table. I felt sure it was here that Ange's delirious fancy would lead her, and I was right. As I arrived opposite the open window of the billiard-room, I caught sight of a dark figure half hidden in the shadow of the wall, and springing towards it, I clasped her in my arms —Ange, with only her black dress covering her nightgown, her bronze-coloured hair floating over her shoulders, and her poor naked feet upon the ground.

'Ange ! Ange ! my darling !' I exclaimed, as I folded her to my heart. 'Come back ! Come home with me ! You will be so ill if you remain here ?'

'*Hush ! Hark !*' she said, with such wide-open, fixed and solemn eyes, and in such a tone of awe, that I felt constrained to obey her.

There were perhaps a dozen men or more, knocking the billiard-balls about and filling the atmosphere with smoke, but Cave Charteris's voice was to be distinguished above them all.

'Reckless old dog, that *Papa* Lovett,' I heard him say. 'He's a regular out-and-out swindler ! I've lent him more cash myself since I've been here than his whole carcase would pay for, but I knew I should never see the colour of it again when I parted with it.'

'Took the change out in other ways, I suppose, *mon cher?*' suggested a foreigner. 'The *bon papa* has two pretty daughters, *n'est-ce pas?* and it is said you have evinced a decided predilection for the little one.'

'*Ah! fi donc*, monsieur!' cried Charteris, jestingly; 'don't make profane remarks! I am a married man! and other men's pretty daughters are of no further use to me.'

'*Vraiment!* I shouldn't have thought it!' rejoined the other, incredulously.

I had felt the slight form in my clasp shiver under these words, as if it had been struck, and I could bear it no longer.

'Ange!' I exclaimed vehemently, 'you *must* come home! this is no place for you! and you will catch your death of cold if you remain here any longer. I *insist* upon your returning with me!'

But there was no answer to my appeal, only the form I held seemed to sink lower and lower, until I could support it no longer.

'Ange! Ange!' I went on in terror, 'try and hold yourself up, or I must call for assistance. I cannot carry you. Oh, darling! make one effort and let me get you home!'

Still she sunk down—down—heavier each moment in my arms.

'Mr. Charteris!' I screamed in my alarm; 'Mr. Charteris! Come here! Come at once—Ange is dying!'

There was a sudden commotion in the billiard-room as my voice reached its occupants—a few exclamations of surprise—a cessation of sound—and then Cave Charteris came flying through the open window to my aid.

'Hold her up!' I panted; 'I have no strength left! She escaped from us in her delirium, and I must have her carried home at once.'

He seized the little figure from me and laid the head against his arm. The light from the billiard-room streamed over her pallid face: her violet eyes were closed and sunken: there was a grey shade about the mouth that was not to be mistaken.

'Ange! Ange! speak to me!' I cried, in my anguish and dismay.

'Ange! *petite* Ange! say you forgive me,' chimed in the deeper tones of Cave Charteris's voice.

At that sound she opened her eyes, very, very slowly, as if the action gave her pain, and fixed them upon his. I saw the words, 'I *forgive*,' tremble upon the quivering lips, which closed again and then fell open as her spirit passed away upon the wings of Night!

* * * * *

I feel that no description I can append to this simple recital can increase its pathos. Ange died—just as I have told you—and I never looked upon the face of Cave Charteris after that night. I never wish to look upon it. He ranks in my memory as one of the worst men I ever met.

Mr. Lovett arrived home on the next day, with the doctor in his train, when *petite* Ange was lying stretched and still upon her bed, with her waxen hands filled with the autumn flowers the poor of St. Pucelle had placed in them. Her father's grief was naturally very violent—such saintly mourners usually mourn noisily. Yet he had not considered his child's illness of sufficient importance to oblige him to give up a dinner at Rille, which he had been pledged to attend on the previous day.

I almost wondered, as I watched him bury her in the little strip of ground appropriated to those of her faith, in the Abbé Morteville's cemetery, that he did not fall headlong on the coffin and denounce himself as Ange's murderer. But no such idea ever entered his venerable head. He lived for several years afterwards, to talk of virtue and practise vice, and when he died, his creditors howled like hungry wolves above his grave, and had to recoup themselves by abusing him for the rest of their lives. Some few got their money—those to whom I had promised it in the courtyard—but their demands were but as a drop in the ocean. Mr. Warrington's advent in St. Pucelle was a terrible blow to Mr. Lovett, especially when his legal research on my behalf resulted in the discovery that a large portion of my little patrimony had been wasted or spent. But I would not let him prosecute my guardian, for Tessie's sake. I felt that she had sorrows enough to bear, poor girl, without this open disgrace being added to them. By the time that Mr. Lovett died, my Armand's term of probation in Algiers was ended, and he had got his own again, so I made Tessie come and live with us.

That was a happy period. It was so delightful to watch the roses return to her cheeks, and the roundness to her form, and to feel that the saddest part of her life was over, and she was free to choose her future destiny. But we did not keep her with us long. In Paris that was hardly to be expected! Everyone prophesied she would marry a foreigner, yet she married——

Stay! Armand and I are going over next week to England, to spend a whole month in Norwood, with my dear old friend Mrs. Sandilands, to whom I am very anxious to introduce my husband and my son, Godefroi de Nesselrode—who is already seven years old.

And Charlie, dear old boy! is anticipating our arrival as if he were still my mother's 'blue-eyed baby' of twenty-two, instead of a sober citizen of thirty, because he wants me, not to be introduced to, but to renew my acquaintance with, *his wife*—Mrs. Sandilands Number Two—my dear friend Tessie!

It all came about as naturally as possible, although it sounds so romantic, for Charlie came to stay with us in Paris, and popped the question to her there, without even asking my advice upon the subject, and took her home with him to be his mother's eldest daughter!

* * * * *

So they all lived happy ever afterwards. Yes, that is true—strictly and literally true—because they were not such fools as to expect, or wish for, unalloyed happiness in this world of shadow. They had been hungry, and they were filled—they had been naked, and they were clothed—they had suffered, sometimes very acutely, and they were loved and looked after, and guarded by good and true men, and would have been ingrates as well as fools, not to recognise how much more fortunate they were than many of their fellows.

But there is one dark passage in Tessie's life and mine which we shall never forget—the night that Ange's spirit spread its wings and flew away from us. Sometimes I wonder, when Armand is more than usually tender to me, or little Godefroi more than usually good, if *she* is hovering round us who are so happy, and rejoices because we rejoice. Or does she stand by Cave Charteris's side, for the sake of the love she bore him, to urge him on to better thoughts and a higher career? Or is she wandering through the Elysian fields with the old father whom she believed in so faithfully, until his blazoned disgrace snapped her tender heart-strings!

Who can tell me? No parson, no priest, no book! Nothing but the greater mystery that bore her from us—the solver of our doubts, the cure for all our sorrows: Death!

Let us thank God that amidst the troubles He ordained for this earthly pilgrimage, He left us a sure and certain remedy that cannot fail to come to everyone at last!

Ange and Tessie and I shall walk together once more, through flowery paths, more beautiful than those in St. Pucelle, and talk of everything that may have befallen us since we last parted! And my mother—my unforgotten, lamented mother, shall smile on us there, and bid us welcome. Reader! do you not believe it?

Then, I pity you! Farewell!

THE END.

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